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THE DROWNING MAN

a collection of stories

by

William V. Stevens, Jr.

B.A. Tufts University, Massachusetts, 1991

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

May 2005

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EMPIRE BUILDER

Three of us, Georgie, Ham and I, were jammed into a sleepingcar as tight as a coffin. Empire Builder. Chicago to Seattle. Business. Ham and I are to take Georgie to see a man who'll help put a knife in Georgie's back, and only Georgie doesn't know about it. Lying on our two-by-four plastic mattresses in ninety-degree heat, we swim in sweat. So we sit in the barcar instead. Pour drinks down our throats. Choke on cigarette smoke.

—Leave the talking to me, I know the man, says Georgie. He ain't all that easy to talk to either. Georgie's face is waterlogged from drinking. Must be gin in the pockets under his eyes. He'd cry booze if he could cry.

—All right, all right, says Ham. You talk.

Ham winks and grins at me. It's his look. The 'let's-have-a-little-fun' look. About as subtle as an elephant in a dress. You'd have to be blotto not to notice. Maybe Georgie is too drunk. I hope he is.

—Let's open the letter, Georgie, says Ham, the one the Boss gave you.

Ham steps on my foot under the table.

—No one's gonna see it but the man we got business with, says Georgie.

That's the kind of man Georgie is. Loyal. Steady. He does what he's told. Shut up and don't ask questions he likes to say. Old school. The Boss says we can't afford Georgie's pension, so he's got to go. We've seen the letter already. Ham and I know what's in it. Georgie doesn't. If he did. But he doesn't.

—C'mon, Georgie, says Ham. Just one peek. No one's gonna know. It's not even sealed. Ham knows Georgie won't open it. He likes to play with fire, but he doesn't like to get burnt.

—You gonna get in some trouble, boy, says Georgie, keep thinking that way.

Ham sniggers. Trouble. Georgie doesn't like the sniggering. He opens his throat and dumps in a drink. Barlight throws Georgie's face into relief. Deep washed-out canyons. Flat pink eyes surfacing out of turbid flesh look Ham over, not searching for trickery, but full of pity and anger. Like a father. I root for Georgie. Straighten him out, Georgie. Else. Ham might find himself on a train with a letter.

Behind Georgie is the night. A pool of dark. The train rocks like a boat. I see my reflection in the window, vague and fantastic. I'm a ghost. A palooka ghost in a cheap polyester jacket the color of mustard-parsley-pimento. Sad honest face. Long. Needs a shave. Too pale, but a good chin. Georgie is my friend. He showed me the ropes and told me I need to act dumber, so I do.

Then there's Frankie who was a kid down the block and my best friend. We cut ourselves once and let blood drip into each other's palms. Later his mother screaming why weren't you with him? You should have been with him!

The policeman with the boathook fishing Frankie from the river, blue-faced and white-limbed, his hair colorless. Did she want me dead too?

—You tell him, says Ham, tell him to open the letter. He'll listen to you.

Georgie opens his jacket and pulls from its depths an envelope. He lays it on the table. Creamy and crispcornered. Thick. Pregnant.

—Whaddya say, kid, Georgie says to me, I'll open it if you say.

Why not? The kid pushed things too far. Maybe I'll teach him a lesson. The envelope feels rough in my fingers. Impossibly light. I hold it upright like a sail. Where would it take us? Ham is uneasy, his nerve extinguished. I flash him a smile. He twitches.

—Leave him alone, Ham, I say, he's a better man than the two of us. Don't trouble him. Don't open it, Georgie.

Georgie chuckles. He takes back the letter, and it slips into his breast.

—That's my boy, he says.

BABY

The first time Baby saw Pam was up on stage at the Off Ramp, at an eighteen and over show. He wasn't eighteen, didn't look eighteen, was in fact a quiet and dark boy with a lock of hair dangling over his forehead, but it didn't matter much for a Tuesday night show. Baby made plans to go with some asshole from school who liked to throw a jackknife at Baby's toes. Baby didn't like him much, but he was the only one who would talk to him if you didn't count the kids who wore sweater vests and gave Baby pamphlets on God. The asshole never showed, though, and when Baby got off the city bus downtown, he was alone.

He drank Mountain Dew in the corner of the club until he saw Pam climb the stage. She sang for an all-girl band called "Bitchy Smurf" and was painted blue. Baby crossed the floor to the milling scrum in front of the stage to get a better look. There were about fifty people at the show, and he and a dozen other boys pogoed a little, and he got an elbow in his throat. He leaned against the stage gasping for air and looked up at Pam, who looked back, face haloed by six-inch spikes and mouth leering with black lipstick. She held up her boot to his face. Baby licked it.

During the next song, she climbed down off the stage while the band clawed at their instruments, and she kissed Baby, snaking her tongue around his mouth and biting his lips. She tasted like copper. Blue paint stuck to Baby's face and hands. It was his first kiss. Later she took him to the alley and fucked him behind the dumpster. He smelled stale beer, piss, and cigarettes and his feet stuck to the pavement. She laughed the whole time.

Inside, Pam bought him beer. He asked her to his junior prom. She said yes.

"What's your name?" she asked. When he told her his real name, she scowled. "What kind of name is that?"

"At school, the kids – a bunch of pricks, really – call me 'Baby,'" he said.

"'Baby'?"

"Because when I was a kid I stole –"

"Don't tell me!" she said. "It's perfect. I don't ever want to know."

Her name was Aurora Youkilis, which Baby secretly admired, but she went by 'Pam.' "The ultimate punk-rock name," she said. She was twenty-three.

The night of Baby's prom, Pam showed up at his house wearing leather pants, motorcycle boots, and a mesh halter top. Her nipples were pierced. She had dyed her hair pink. Baby wore a baby-blue tuxedo and had given himself a mohawk. Instead of a carnation, she gave him a roll of duct tape. He hadn't bought her a flower, but found a laminated cockroach key ring and gave that to her. She stuck it through her ear. Baby's mother had bought a disposable camera

for the occasion but was still in her room crying. Baby hurried Pam out before his mother came down the stairs.

Pam had borrowed a motorcycle from a friend. He rode behind her, his hands circled around her waist. As they drove through Seattle's neighborhoods, he realized he might like Pam better than the Ramones.

At the dance, there were balloons and bubbles in the air, and a band playing Journey, Air Supply, and Pearl Jam. Pam popped balloons with a lit cigarette until the biology teacher, a big fat-faced woman, stomped over and put an end to her fun. Everyone else was wearing pink dresses and spaghetti straps. The boys had gel in their hair. Pam had beers in her pockets, which they drank in paper cups. The school running back asked Pam to dance.

"Fuck off," she said to the running back.

"In ninth grade," said Baby, "he cracked an egg in my hair."

"It's like a K-tel album cover in here," she said, watching dry ice fumes twist across the dance floor.

They left early and got high, fucked, and fell asleep on the beach. Pam threw her coat over them. Baby held her close, but kept scratching his arms on her spiked wrist bands. Sand got in his ears. Pam lay on her face and snored. Baby hardly slept. At first light, he watched as shapes and lines emerged from the mist, and then the mountains appeared out of the void. Along the beach, there was movement. Figures stirred, some sat up, some held out their arms. A dozen other couples lay in the sand.

* * *

Pam's mother died of cancer – Pam wasn't specific about which kind – and she invited him to go to the funeral, only she wasn't able to borrow a car that day, and they were stuck in north Seattle. They walked to the little park down the street, each carrying a can of spray paint, which they used on the cement-block walls of the bathrooms. Pam painted a happy face with a head wound: a red circle in the forehead, paint dripping down the cheek. Baby twined their names in a heart, and then speared it with an arrow. Pam licked his cheek and ran up the hill, laughing.

He found her in an empty lot strewn with rubbish. She had a bicycle, which she wheeled out to the sidewalk. It was a kid's bike with a banana seat and funky handlebars, only it was almost rusted through and the spokes were rotting. It might have been purple once. Somehow the orange flag had survived and was still attached to the seat.

“A gift from God,” said Pam.

She suggested they ride to the funeral on the bike. Baby didn't mention the distance; Pam's mother was going to be buried in Olympia, a hundred miles away. He knew it was just a game.

“I wonder what happened to the kid,” said Baby.

“You are so morbid,” said Pam.

Pam climbed on the bike and teetered down the sidewalk.

She rode back to where Baby stood. “Get on,” she said. She patted the handlebars. Baby was tall but blade-thin, light enough – maybe – to ride with Pam on the bike. He hesitated. Pam noticed.

“Get on, Baby,” she said, “can you think of a better way to die?”

Baby climbed on.

They rode down Roosevelt. Pam sang Social Unrest’s, “Ever Fallen in Love?”, in Baby’s ear. Baby was giddy. The wheel buckled between his legs. Pam’s arms circled him, her hands – grimy – on the handlebar grips on either side of his waist. Round faces of onlookers stared up. Baby flipped them off. The wind in his face, the fear, Pam’s hoarse punk-rock voice, the feeling of flying past houses and lawns and schools, it was real and electric.

* * *

When Baby ran away from home, Pam orchestrated the operation. She waited until Baby’s mother was doped up on her sedatives, then pulled up to the house in a pickup truck, which Baby didn’t think they needed; all he had was a duffel bag, and it wasn’t even full.

“It’s not for your stuff,” she said.

“What do you mean?” said Baby.

“You’ve got to cut your ties, Baby. Plus we could use the money.”

They carried out the television, the microwave, the stereo. There wasn’t much else. Pam went back in to have a last look. Baby sat on the open tailgate of the truck and smoked a cigarette, guarding the well-worn electronics that were as familiar to him as siblings. When he finished the butt and Pam still hadn’t come out, he went back inside. He found her in the living room admiring his mother’s angel figurine collection, which was perched on three wide glass shelves.

“They’re beautiful,” said Pam.

They were.

The angels lounged on a bed of cotton balls Baby's mother had glued to the shelving to serve as cloud. The figurines varied in size. Some were painted with crimson robes and blew golden horns. Some were glass, some porcelain. Lean, blonde angels unfurled their wings as if preparing for flight. A group of handsome female angels gathered with hymn books and were caught mid-verse, mouths askew with ecstasy. A stern Gabriel wielded his flaming sword like a marching-band baton over a nursery of naked pre-adolescent Cupids, who drew tendrils of cloud across their flanks in modesty, or maybe it was for the feel of velvet on skin.

As a child, Baby would pull a chair to the wall and study the angels. He imagined himself in their company, naked in the clouds, a perfect mother and father by his side and a playground of cupids nearby where he could play and not get thrown to the ground and spat on. No schools or hospitals or social workers or city busses or YMCA shower rooms. Just cloud, which would be soft and pliable, and you could build a nest for yourself and lie curled in a knot, flesh pressed against the ones you loved and who loved you in return.

"How much do you think they're worth?" asked Baby.

They rolled the collection into a blanket and threw it into the back of the truck.

Pam sold the electronics to a guy she knew. They got a hundred-fifty for everything. They spread the blanket on a University District sidewalk and sold the

angels for fifty cents apiece. Baby got bored after an hour and ground the remaining dozen or so figurines under his boot heel. They spent the money on pot.

* * *

“You can’t stay with me,” said Pam. Her room was too small. She was never there. Her roommates hated men. They worshipped eggs, decorated them with lace, paint, dye, and set them on altars. No fucking was allowed in the apartment. It might contaminate the eggs. The eggs would get pissed off. It wouldn’t work out.

Baby lived with a group of hippies in Magnolia. He had his own room – a garage with carpet thrown on the cement – and worked part-time as a barrista. It was a decent life. He had a little money. Through Pam he entered Seattle’s punk scene, made a lot of friends, saw shows, drank, did drugs, had the time of his life. He felt immortal, at the center of things, like he was walking on the edge of a cliff or on a tight rope.

Pam came and went. She visited him in his garage in Magnolia, sometimes dramatically yanking the door open in the middle of the night, drunk, smelling of cigarettes and aerosol. He saw her at shows. “Bitchy Smurf” broke up, but then there was “The Spats,” “Vomit,” and “Dead Rabbit.” She borrowed cars and they drove to Spokane, Portland, and Elko, Nevada. She taught him to dumpster dive, and they feasted on the trash behind the health-food Co-op, finding lettuce, carrots, mushrooms, tomatoes, and feta cheese. She worked at a small record store downtown, and he’d stop by, finger the albums if anyone was around, and if not

they'd go to the back room. He never asked her what she did when he wasn't around, and she never told him.

The garage became too cold in the winter, and he moved his sleeping bag and duffel to the living room, which he had to share with three hippie boys. It was crowded and reeked of patchouli, but he'd put on his headphones and read a science-fiction paperback or the occasional collection of women's erotica that Pam loaned him, and it was bearable. He wasn't home much anyway. He was out with friends, sometimes at the all-night cafes on Capitol Hill where they played Magic, chess, and scrabble, sometimes under the bridge at Fremont, drinking malt liquor while sitting in the lap of the troll, sometimes downtown at the clubs and shows. They'd sit in the third deck in the King Dome and root for the M's, especially Edgar Martinez, the designated hitter.

Sometimes Baby was with Pam. They'd take off for days at a time, hit the road or hole up in a cheap Aurora Street motel. They'd take midnight drives to the Cascades and wander down logging roads and fuck among ten-foot ferns in strands of cedar. Or they'd have a beer in a pub, shoot pool, play darts. And invariably end up, it seemed to Baby, in wool coats wandering Seattle through the midnight drizzle, talking.

* * *

Baby and Pam ran into his mother in a Laundromat. She sat in the corner, reading *Cosmo*. He didn't recognize her at first: she was too small and gray. But she wore her rubber galoshes, and her lips pinched an unlit menthol. It was her. Her face had new lines, mostly pointed down, and her hair was dyed bright red.

Dishwater roots and a rose-colored scalp were visible through the thinning strands.

He nudged Pam and said it was his mother. She said, “that old bat?” and pushed him to say hello. He crossed the room, thinking Pam was with him, but when he reached his mother, he saw Pam was studying the detergent dispenser.

His mother squinted up at him and frowned. He was taller now, running towards heavy-set, with long greasy hair and black eyeliner. He held his head up and kept his back straight and looked at his mother down his nose, like an aristocrat.

“Oh, it’s you,” said his mother. She was reading an article, “The New G-Spot.” “You’re all grown up.”

She didn’t stand, so Baby sat down. She rummaged in her pocketbook – a hideous green thing made of fake alligator skin – and came out with a pack of gum in an electric blue wrapper. She unwrapped a piece, day-glo yellow and toxic-looking, and dropped it in her mouth. There were gaps in her teeth, her gums were pale and sickly. She offered Baby a piece. He took it.

“How you doing, Mama?” said Baby.

“You don’t care,” she said.

Baby reached around his mother’s shoulders and gave a squeeze. “Yes, I do, Mama,” he said, and for a moment he really did.

His mother shrugged his hand from her shoulder. “Don’t touch me,” she said.

Baby made up stories. He told her he was married and got his GED and was in the community college and had a nice place to live. "You should come over, Mama," he said. "I'm doing real good."

"You smell," she said, wrinkling her nose.

Pam had wandered around to the front of Laundromat and stared out the window at the empty street. Baby's mother gazed at Pam's back, the shaved head, the holes in her stockings, the boots held together with pins and tape.

"It's her, isn't it?" asked his mother.

"What do you mean?" said Baby.

"You didn't have to take my angels," she said with red-rimmed eyes.

* * *

Just when Baby was beginning to feel a little stretched out and tired, cramped by his lifestyle, Pam vanished. His crazy hours had finally caught up with him, and he sometimes needed to sleep all day, only the hippies kept him up, coming and going and playing their guitars and little wooden drums. He fantasized about having his own room, maybe his own apartment. He asked for more hours at the café, found a job on Saturday afternoons giving surveys over the phone, and quit smoking. He started saving.

He began to have other aspirations, too, although he admitted them to no one. He'd see young fathers strolling with babies and feel a pang, begin to dream of living with a family in a little warm bungalow suffused with the smell of coffee and fresh-baked bread, a laughing child, and a beautiful wife: Pam. It'd be the perfect life, full of happiness and love, something he'd never had. He wrote in the

margins of the city's free weekly the steps he'd have to take: GED, associate's degree (at least), decent job, insurance. It would take time and money, but the more he thought of it, the better it sounded. After all, he wasn't asking for a million dollars, a rock star's life, or immortality. His dream was modest, simple. If it couldn't be got, what could?

And then Pam was gone. First she was there, and then she wasn't. He asked around, visited the spots she liked, stopped by the record store, but no one knew where she was. No one cared, either. People came and left. Sometimes they'd come back in a couple of years. Sometimes they vanished into the heart of Seattle itself, into a job and house and were as good as dead. But this was Pam, and Baby couldn't imagine her anywhere else but in alleys and garbage cans, cheap apartments and clubs.

He searched for her. He called directory assistance for "Aurora Youkilis," but she didn't have a telephone in Seattle under that name. He tried to talk to her roommates, but they were looking for her, too. Pam owed them money. They wanted to collect from him. "You were her favorite boyfriend," they said, trying to suck up to him. "Fuck eggs," he said and left.

He moved back into the garage and slept twelve, sixteen hours a day. He stopped going to work. He drank heavily. He lived off of noodles and white bread. When he stood up, he'd get dizzy and stagger around like an idiot. When the French Canadian came onto to him in the garage, he fucked her. Her boyfriend got pissed, and Baby had to leave the house. He stayed with a friend on Capitol Hill who had gotten an eviction notice and let anybody sleep on his floor. They'd

scorch the rugs with lighters, peel away the wallpaper, or shit and piss in the corners. When the cops came and drove them out, Baby slept on couches, in bathtubs, once on a landing for three days. There were flops, condemned buildings, a school bus in somebody's back yard, even a park for a week, living under a low-lying pine, his duffel bag as his pillow. It wasn't very glamorous. Along the way he'd gotten lice and genital warts, his tongue piercing was infected, and he had a wet cough for three months.

Baby looked for Pam everywhere. He waited for hours outside the doors of clubs. He frequented record stores, all-night diners, he checked hospitals, he scanned the police logs. He went to the library and looked in other cities' telephone books for the name "Youkilis." He realized she could be dead. There were so many ways to die, too. Overdose. Car accident. Sudden and severe allergic reaction. Hypothermia. She could have drowned, been swept away by an avalanche, fallen off a building. Even murder had many forms: strangulation, shooting, stabbing, suffocation, immolation. The myriad ways to leave life nagged at him, danced at the edge of his thoughts. But he pushed them away. This was Pam. She wouldn't let herself go. At least not without panache, not without everyone knowing exactly how and why and when, and not without some satisfaction or pride in the task. A death that people could admire, and maybe even envy.

No. Pam had to be alive. She was raising hell in some other city, San Francisco or Los Angeles, or maybe even New York. Of course, that was limiting her. She could be farther than that. Madrid or Paris or Rome, or why not Tangiers,

Constantinople, Cairo? Some place exotic and alien, burning with golden sand, rich with the scent of saffron and cinnamon, hashish and coffee. It had to be that way. Why else would she just pick up and leave without a word to Baby?

But then some asshole at the Rock Candy told Baby she was dead. A body had been seen. It was her. But when pressed, the prick couldn't give any details. Baby didn't believe him, but he gave up on Pam. She was gone. He got drunk and stayed that way for two weeks, until he found that asshole and punched him in the face with a bottle, for which he spent ten satisfying days in the municipal jail.

When he got out, he stood on the pavement blinking in the sun. He'd worn a county-issued jumpsuit for the ten days, and when he put on his clothes at release, they smelled rank, like an ashtray, and were sticky and damp, like the floor at the movies. Instead of warming him, the sun's rays made him feel faded, like the color of the sidewalk and street, of the suits and cars that passed him by. He felt washed out. Overcooked. Finished. He had lost his bag. He had nothing. He thought about the Egdar Martinez card he kept in the bag, knew it had to be in the trash, and he felt ashamed that he had maltreated such a classy ballplayer, his favorite. He had kept the card to show his kids someday, to tell them how he strode to the plate with his sleeves rolled up like an ordinary, everyday slob headed out to a job, and they'd have the card to look at, and would see the square, honest face and know that life sometimes went the way it was supposed to go. But now on the sidewalk in front of the jail he realized he would never have that happy little family he had so recently dreamed of.

Still, Pam was out there. Somewhere.

* * *

Baby married a girl, Sandra, although it wasn't for real. She needed student loans, but was too young to get a loan on her own. Her parents wouldn't co-sign – there had been a falling out. Her alternative was to get married. Because they were dating, Baby volunteered. “Just for the loan,” said Sandra when she agreed.

Not believing the marriage was genuine in any way, it still affected Baby. He cut his hair, got a regular job in a coffee shop. They got an apartment together, just a tiny studio, hardly big enough for the two of them, but Baby loved to come home and find her asleep, or on the couch watching tee-vee or reading. It felt homey, domestic. He started cooking, getting recipes out of the newspaper, from magazines at the library. Sometimes he caught himself humming at the sink, wiping pots with a dish towel.

Sandra never went to school. She got pregnant instead, which meant they needed money. Baby got a job on a fish-processing boat in Alaska and worked twelve-hour shifts gutting crab in the bowel of an enormous ship that pitched on ten-foot swells. During his off-hours, he lay in his bunk and imagined playing catch with a boy. The boy would be clumsy and drop the ball, and he would teeter after it with a maniacal laugh. The dream made Baby feel better, which was helpful, because the job was nightmarish and seemed to last forever.

When he returned to Seattle, Sandra was gone. She had moved back to Indiana or Kansas or Ohio. There was a note on the kitchen table. The baby

wasn't his, she wrote, and she left an address where he could send money. He folded a dollar bill in an envelope with no return address and sent it to her.

Sandra's clothes still hung in the closets, and her belongings were still scattered around the shelves and in drawers. He held her plastic flip-flops to his nose, he tasted the wine coolers – now soured – he found in the fridge, he ran her pink terrycloth robe over his body, he watched her videotapes, romantic comedies mostly. Who was this woman he had lived with? Piecing her together from her relics, Baby thought that he didn't know Sandra at all. So he sat on the couch amidst her things, and thought of Pam painted blue, dancing under a desert moon.

He blew that year's fishing money and the next, but after that he started saving and working odd jobs in the winter, at a beer-bottling plant, as a bouncer, telemarketer, and bike messenger. He delivered pizzas, tended bar, mopped the floors at the university, and even earned a little extra in an industrial bowling league. He stopped going to shows and penning the circled "A" on his jackets. He removed his piercings and cut his hair at a barber's. He cut out the crazy stuff like crank and sniffing glue. He got a black lab and named her "Bitch." He bought a shitbox house in Ballard, and watched its value climb during the Internet boom. He had a number of girlfriends. A couple moved in with him and stayed a while, but nothing ever worked out. When he lost a pinkie to a gutting knife, he quit going north and stayed put in Seattle.

No one called him "Baby" anymore.

Once, on a cold November night, he was a little drunk walking home from a bar in the gentrified Ballard shopping district. He was following a group of kids,

punks like he used to be, and he couldn't help but laugh. He saw pimples, sprouts of hair on upper lips, shoulders bent by insecurity. They looked so young. It was like travelling back in time. What fools, he told himself, but they looked full of themselves. He missed his friends with a pain that sliced his gut.

At the head of the group was a girl who looked like Pam. Same head shaved to the bangs, which were dyed black and unfurled over her forehead. Same dark eyeliner. Same ass-kicking combat boots, same thick legs, cleft chin, tiny nose, high cheeks. The same goddamned insouciance dripping off every limb, and Baby stared and stared, because – it couldn't be – but – and so he hurried his pace and caught up to them – her – chatted, passed around a beer he had in his pocket, and worked his way next to her side.

It wasn't Pam, of course. Close up he saw she was shorter, had lighter eyes and more fat in her cheeks. She giggled a lot. Wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

When he asked for her number, she asked him how old he was.

He shrugged. "What does it matter?"

"You could be my father's age," she said.

He wasn't that old. He had just turned thirty.

"You could be my teacher's age," she said.

"Are you eighteen?" he said, not caring really.

"Of course," she said and gave him the number.

She wasn't at all like Pam. The last time they were together, the girl slept in his bed while he smoked at the window and drank a beer. She was an outline

under the covers. It was only in this half-light that she resembled Pam anymore. He drank, pretending he was a kid and that it was Pam in his bed, but the headlights in the street out his window blinded him. He rubbed the stump where his pinky had been. It was no use.

* * *

The drinking bouts returned, with similar results. He lost jobs, friends, ran through his savings, which wasn't much to begin with. Then he re-mortgaged his house to invest in a fishing boat some guy at a bar told him he was outfitting for the Alaska king crab harvest. Sure money, said the guy. Later he told Baby the ship sunk in the Shelikof Strait. He looked glum. "Storm," he said and shook his head. "They come up fast." Baby lost the house. He had half known all along it was a scam, but had dropped the money anyway: his life had been in serious decline, why not give it a little push, see where it would end up?

The next time he was sober for more than twelve hours was in Missoula, Montana, at a halfway house by court order, four years later. He was a mess. Sunlight hurt his eyes. When he looked in the mirror, he could see the slick of poison oozing out of his skin, which had turned light gray. His hair was lifeless and stood straight up from his scalp. He had wrinkles around his eyes. The corners of his mouth were clenched the way they do on men who have lost everything .

At first, he sat in his room with the lights off, but his counselor, Dick – a smug little prick with a swath of black hair over an expansive upper lip – said he needed to re-enter the world. Baby protested, saying the light was too bright, but

Dick bought him gas-station sunglasses and insisted Baby sit on the balcony of the house for a few hours each day. Baby complied. He peered out from cheap tinted lenses at the world, which was a side-street with a burnt-out convenience store on the opposite corner. He convinced himself he felt better.

Dick said Baby ran away from his problems, which made Baby laugh.

“That’s all there is to life,” replied Baby, “problems.”

“So you’re not running from your problems?”

“No,” said Baby, scratching the Naugahyde cover of his chair with a ragged nail. “I guess I’m running *to* my problems.”

“Cute,” said Dick.

Baby didn’t think Dick was very professional. He sneered a lot. He tended to argue with the house inmates. He berated and insulted them. It was as if he hated drunks, as if he had seen too many of them. Baby sympathized. The inmates were annoying, openly self-pitying, and they were half dead, mostly walking around in a daze. Just like Baby.

Dick was persistent. Baby suspected he enjoyed forcing the drunks to think about themselves in the most painful way possible. For Baby, according to Dick, that meant coming to terms with his past. His mother, for example. Or his father. Or Pam.

“Do you miss her?” asked Dick.

“Yes,” said Baby.

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” said Baby. “I keep thinking, if she hadn’t disappeared....”

“What? Your life would be different? Happy?”

Baby shrugged.

“I notice you use the word ‘disappear’ when you talk about Pam,” said Dick. “Or ‘vanish.’ You never say, ‘left.’ Has it occurred to you that she left you? Abandoned you?”

“Yes,” said Baby.

“Let’s talk about that, and how it makes you feel.”

The sessions went on like this. Baby retraced his past in excruciating detail. Once Baby recounted the day of Pam’s mother’s funeral and the accident.

They had been coasting down Roosevelt on the bike, Baby feeling wonderful, in love. They approached an intersection, and the light turned. Pam slammed the brakes and nearly threw Baby off the bike. And then the brake pads popped off.

“*Pop, Pop,*” said Baby. That was exactly the sound they made.

The bike lurched towards traffic. Pam spilled the bike. Baby hung in the air, saw the mailbox and met it with his face. A small crowd gathered. Pam was on her ass rubbing her elbows, hysterical with laughter. Baby’s face was numb. He felt snot on his lip, only it wasn’t snot, it was blood and a lot of it. Someone in the crowd said, “oh geeze,” like Baby really had screwed up his face, and someone else said, “do you want an ambulance?” like he knew what he wanted, which he didn’t because his face was numb.

“Oh, Baby,” said Pam. “You look divine.” She laughed and there was a ragged tooth. She crawled over to him and licked his lip. Her mouth was blood

red. "I think it's broken," she said. "Here's your chance at that nose job you've needed."

"Not funny," said Baby, but laughed anyway.

"Was she high?" asked Dick.

"I don't know," said Baby. "I never thought about it. Does it matter?"

"Do you think it matters?"

"No," said Baby.

"Well, then," said Dick.

Later they were back at Killer's who lived in a basement. It was a nice setup. Someone had erected sheet rock walls behind the washer and dryer and made a little room, which Killer had furnished with scrap rug, a mattress, and a couch fished from a dumpster. It was cold and damp, and rats nested in the makeshift wall. Baby sat on the mattress with Killer and watched Pam and Greta make out on the couch. Only Pam kept biting Greta's tongue with her broken tooth.

Killer and Baby argued about how to treat the broken nose.

"You've got to have it reset," said Killer. "Re-break the fucker."

"It's fine," said Baby.

Baby's nose ached. He was dizzy with pain. But the idea of seeing a doctor was worse. He imagined the white halls, the stench of antiseptic and laundry detergent, all the old people, the sick people, surrounded by tubes and machines and dying in pieces. And the doctor, some arrogant fuck who'd act

annoyed that Baby screwed up his golf game with his little accident, his attitude suggesting Baby shouldn't be trusted with his body.

"Ow," said Greta from the couch. "You're such a bitch."

"It's twisted," said Killer, "if you don't re-break it you'll be a freak forever."

"You do it," Baby said to Killer.

"Are you serious?" said Killer.

Pam and Greta stopped fooling around on the couch. "No way," said Pam.

They gave Baby a glass of whiskey. It was supposed to help with the pain. But when he tried to drink, he choked because he couldn't breathe through his nose. He lay back on the mattress. Killer straddled his chest, knees over his arms. Pam held his head. Baby felt in absolute control, as if he were moving people around the room like the little cast-iron pieces from Monopoly.

Killer reached down, grabbed Baby's nose and twisted. Blood, mucus ran. Baby screamed. They all cringed, and Baby felt wonderful.

"You are beautiful," said Pam.

"So she thrived on your pain," said Dick. "This is the girl you've pinned all your hopes on?"

"It's more complicated than that," said Baby.

"It always is," said Dick and jotted a note on his legal pad.

Baby tried to hold on to Pam, but bit by bit, Dick destroyed her. Everything she did was seen by Dick through a prism of pain and power. Everything she said was evidence of contempt for Baby. Every affectionate

thought Baby had for her was evidence of his own weakness, his own desire to suffer. As a result, Pam was fragmenting, breaking into pieces in his memory. Who was she? Where once Baby could call to mind in an instant the way Pam shivered when he kissed the back of her neck, could even feel her neck's soft down under his lips, he now couldn't remember the shape of her nose, the color of her eyes, or even what she looked like when she smiled.

When Baby admitted this to Dick, the counselor looked satisfied, almost gleeful. But Dick didn't stop there. Baby had to explore every hurt, every wound, explain to Dick why the flaws in his own self led to his pain and misfortune, his isolation and alienation as a child, and his running away to end up homeless, abusive, and unable to maintain relationships as an adult. It was all his own damn fault, implied the questioning. It depressed Baby to think he had started all this, that he had been cruel and thoughtless. Not a victim, but the aggressor in everything. It also depressed Baby to think about all the people he'd lost. His mother, his friends, his lovers, Pam. Those who'd been left behind – or maybe it was Baby who was left behind, too stupid to keep up. Baby's past seemed like a battlefield with the lifeless, bent bodies of his relationships strewn across the broken ground. Now he knew exactly how alone he was. Baby felt like nothing after the sessions, like less than nothing, like vermin, something you'd cross the room to stomp on with your heel if you saw it.

Baby's body ached for alcohol. His mind nearly shut down. He stopped talking with the other drunks and mostly stared at the street. His thoughts faded,

were replaced by a pleasant buzz. Dick said this was normal, part of the body's healing process. It was like hibernating. Baby would snap out of it. Eventually.

* * *

And then one day she walked right by. Pam. Baby sat on the balcony, and at first he saw only the stroller she was pushing, one of those new high-tech things with large rubber wheels, all struts and bars like a catamaran, and at the two babies inside. Twins, he thought, poor bastard, and looked up and recognized her instantly.

She was older, heavier, her hair was past her shoulders and pulled back into a ponytail. She wore glasses, a fashionable winter coat, duck boots. Worry lines cut her forehead. She pushed the stroller with a manic intensity; it practically hopped along the sidewalk. Her hands were red with windburn, her knuckles white on the stroller bar.

But there was the old Pam, head high, face determined, defiant. The muscle at her jaw was knotted. And her posture, the way she held herself so that her clothes seemed to swing from her limbs with the lazy assurance of a man leaning against a lamp post.

It was Pam, all right.

And then she was gone. She turned the corner and vanished.

The sight of Pam struck him like a thunderclap. He jumped up from his chair. He whipped off his glasses and reeled from the intensity of the light. His head ached. He could feel the blood beat in his temples. His hands were slicked with sweat. He staggered down the balcony and upset chairs, bumped into the row

of smokers, who murmured in protest. He found himself leaning against the chain-link fence at the sidewalk, peering down the empty street.

It had rained that morning, and puddles still dotted the pavement like forgotten mirrors. The charred walls of the ruin across the street glistened ebony-like. Slate-colored clouds pushed across the sky, and a warm breeze still wet from the weather ruffled Baby's hair. A car passed, its wheels splashed through the water.

Pam? Here? It didn't make sense. None of it. And that was exactly why he believed it so fervently.

Baby spent all his waking free time on the balcony, pacing back and forth past the plastic lawn chairs set up on the astroturf, smoking incessantly, talking to himself, hoping she'd return. He was so animated the others steered clear of him. They were afraid of this madness and didn't complain when he stepped on their toes while they took in some sun.

Baby didn't mention the sighting to Dick. In fact, he was done with that asshole. That one sight of Pam had done more for him than a whole lifetime of therapy could. Instead of feeling unhappy, reflective, inward-turning, the sight of Pam made his scalp tingle, his loins rumble. He hadn't felt this good about things since he was flopping in Seattle, punk-rock style, he hadn't felt this good since the night in the alley when Pam had showed him you could catch lightning in a bottle, that he could live, he *would* live!

He starting noticing things. Little things. How the sun threw shadow in the folds of his clothes. How debris worked its way down the street inches at a time, a

river unfolding at a glacial pace. How the air brushed his fingertips. How the smoke from his cigarettes curled above his head in a spiral. He felt the ridges in the roof of his mouth with his tongue. He heard the murmur of cars, voices, the hum of electricity, the slam of doors and windows. He gave himself over to his senses and nearly missed her when she passed by a second time.

“Pam!” he cried, startling the sunbathers on his balcony. “Pam!” he shouted again, when she failed to turn. His heart sank. It had to be her! And then:

“Aurora!”

And she turned.

He flew down the stairs, heedless of what the sight of a leather-skinned fanatic with a halo of stiff, wiry hair and gaunt, unshaven cheeks charging towards her from a halfway house must look like to a new mother. “Aurora!” he shouted, “Aurora!” He jumped across the lawn and threw his hands into the air. “Aurora!” He banged against the chain link fence, slapped it with his hands, laughed. “God damn!” he said.

Pam frowned. Her eyes were shaded, unlike those of her babies who peered with intense curiosity from their bed. They had her violet eyes.

“Do I know you?” she said.

“It’s me,” he said, and gave his real name. She stared back with a blank look, and he realized his mistake. “Baby!” he said, “it’s me, Baby!”

There was a pause. Her mouth screwed up in concentration. “Baby,” she said. She tasted the name on her tongue, let it roll around her mouth. Her eyes narrowed, taking him in. “Baby.” Simply, just like that.

It hadn't been long before she remembered, but it was long enough. Baby's joy died in his throat, his limbs drooped, he sagged against the fence as if he had lost his footing.

"You in there?" she said, pointing to the halfway house with her chin.

Baby turned around like he was surprised to see the building behind him. "Oh," he said. "Yeah. Hard times. You know." He shrugged.

"Are you doing okay?" she asked.

And he thought, *you don't care, do you?* Baby was distracted. He was close enough to smell her perfume, shampoo, deodorant. Fruit, nuts, flowers. She smelled like she came in a box. But he somehow managed to piece together an answer, relating in not-too-incoherent terms the story of the fishing-boat scam, his depression, his arrival in Montana, and the run-in with a bartender in a hard-nose locals-only bar downtown. He stumbled over his words, breathless from his mad dash to the fence. Pam grew agitated. Her forehead furrowed, and she shuffled her weight from foot to foot.

He asked inane questions. What are you doing, how are you doing, are these your kids? And she dutifully provided the answers, like they exchanged Christmas cards or something and were just catching up. She was a special ed teacher. Living with her husband, Jeremy. She was fine, great really. These, indeed, were her children, Seneca and Lucas, ten months old last Tuesday.

He could see she wanted to go. His intrusion into her day was unwelcome, but he was loathe to let her go. Still, small talk was for Baby a foreign language,

and he was having trouble steering away from powerful or emotional subjects that might upset her, drive her away. Still, he couldn't help himself.

"What happened to you? You just walked away," he said – or let spill out.

"I was worried sick. Why didn't you say anything?"

"Oh, God. Don't remind me. I don't remember much. Like a bad dream."

She waved at the air like she was swatting a fly. "That's ancient history. I had all I could take finally. I went home."

"Montana?"

"Yes and no. This is where my mom moved after the divorce. She's from down in the Bitterroot. I came out to live with her."

"Your mother?"

"She lives just around the corner –" said Pam, pointing, then stopping herself. "Anyway. Nearby."

"I thought she was dead," said Baby.

"No. And then I got a teaching degree, met Jeremy, bought a house, and now I've got these jokers." She reached down into the stroller and tickled one of her children. They both looked up at her, tilting their heads back, then focused again on Baby. One began kicking its legs and the other muttered.

The rest was a blur. Chatter. It wasn't long before he ran out of questions, and she walked away.

That night, Baby had dish duty and cut his hand on a knife in the sink. He didn't call out, he just stood and watched the soap bubbles grow pink, until Dick, who was passing by, noticed and pulled Baby's hand out of the water. Blood ran

down Baby's arm. Dick yelled, and there was a clatter, shouts, toppled chairs, a dish breaking. Someone swaddled the hand, and Baby was trundled off in Dick's car to the emergency room.

The car smelled of mildew and garlic. The traffic was backed up on the four-lane road that ran past car parks and strip malls. Dick, who was visibly nervous, shouted at the cars in front of him. Baby stared out the window and marveled at the stores they passed – it was the low-rent district, and the shops on the edge of town served a hodge-podge of rare or unique needs. A lawn mower repair shop, a baseball card shop, a pedicurist for pets. He hadn't realized how many businesses the trivial needs of people supported.

The old Pam would've thought the drive to the hospital was funny. She'd have pointed out the stores and made fun of the empty lots. The old Pam would've licked the blood from Baby's hand. She would've kept her head, not rushed Baby out the door. She would've preferred to see a ragged scar on Baby's hand. Let your wounds show, she'd have said. You earned them.

Was that really Pam he saw? Could she really have changed so much? Baby realized it didn't matter. What mattered was that he was free of years of longing. He didn't care what happened to her anymore. If anything, he pitied her. It was like she had fallen into a machine. A crazy machine that stuffed her into a mould, created a pre-packaged, ready-to-wear version of Pam built for suburban success, complete with insta-nuclear family. It didn't matter that he hadn't affected Pam in any meaningful way. That wasn't his fault, he saw that now.

They passed a church – a pathetic structure that had once been a modular home – whose very poverty somehow created an aura of dignity, as if it signaled the fervor that could be found at worship, inside. A wheelchair ramp had been hastily added to the entrance. In front was a scrap of lawn and a small dirt lot, muddy from the rain and slashed with ruts and dips. The building probably had been gutted, laid with carpet, and would be filled with cheap plastic chairs for services. By the road stood a shabby sign leaning sharply on its trailer bed. In fifteen-cent plastic letters was spelled a message: “Ascend to Heaven on the Wings of Angels.”

Dick pretended not to notice that Baby wept on the way to the hospital.

That night, a couple of hours after the midnight bed check, Baby stuffed his cigarettes and lighter in his jacket pocket and crawled through his bedroom window. Outside, the grass crinkled under his tennis shoes. He stole over to the fence and looked up into the sky. It was vast, impenetrable. And it was his. He was free, to do anything or go anywhere.

As he jumped the fence, he imagined his outstretched arms were wings, and that he soared upward into the night sky.

PIRATES

The first Halloween after Amanda threw Farrington out of the apartment started with an email from Doctor Ho. *Farrington, see me during my office hours. I want to talk to you about your mid-term.* Signed “Ho.” Not “Andrew,” the way he had signed his emails at the beginning of the semester. Not even “Doctor Ho.” He had tossed the syllable onto the end of the email with the same nonchalance a gangster used to stick a knife into a man’s belly.

Farrington mounted the stairs in the San Francisco Academy of Pain Research to Dr. Ho’s office wearing his rented pirate’s costume. It included real leather boots, a prop flintlock pistol, a fencing sword, and a large hat with red and gold plumes, and had cost two hundred dollars he didn’t have. Farrington jingled as he trod the hall to Ho’s office door where an anatomy poster of a man flayed alive and stuck with innumerable pins greeted him. The man had arms palms out at his sides and wore a look of horror on lidless eyes.

Farrington knocked on the door.

“Come in!” said a high-pitched voice.

Doctor Ho was bent over his laptop, typing furiously, his mouth screwed into a knot of disgust. “Just a minute,” he said without looking up. He pounded

the keyboard with his index fingers. "Goddamn idiots," he said in an undertone. The wet, thin strands of Ho's comb-over swept across his scalp like weed hiding bone. Farrington pushed his eye patch to his forehead and held his captain's hat awkwardly at his side.

Ho slammed a key and glowered at the computer screen. He grunted and spun on his chair. "Thank you for your prompt—" he started, then stared at Farrington. "Is this a joke?"

"No, sir, it's Halloween."

Ho eyed the pistol hanging from the bandolier across Farrington's chest. "I've got your exam," he said and rummaged behind his desk, resurfacing with a red-ink stained sheaf of paper. He threw it at Farrington, who caught it and turned to the last page. In Ho's immaculate hand was written, "F: thirty-two."

"You're wasting my time, Farrington"

"No, sir. I—"

"From your test, Farrington, it would appear you absorbed little, if any, information from my class. You're lucky I gave you credit for remembering your name."

Farrington looked at the exam and saw Ho had indeed given him two points for his name. He stared at the tiny two, noted its smooth curves and curlicue at its tip, and heard as if through thick glass Ho's voice elaborate on Farrington's efforts. Earlier this semester Ho had warned him about his grades and had put him on academic probation but had at least treated Farrington politely. Probably because Farrington had played up his split with Amanda. He

mulled bringing it up again, but decided against it. Today Ho seemed beyond compassion.

“Frankly I’m tired of students coming to my school, thinking acupuncture is on par with drumming, smoking pot, and communing with nature,” said Ho.

“This is not New Age fun, Farrington. Acupuncture is a medicinal practice, and I demand that my students take it seriously. Are you with me, Farrington?”

“Yes, sir.”

“No, you’re not Farrington,” said Ho. “You have six weeks to bring your grades up, or you’ll be expelled.”

Before Farrington could respond, Ho turned back to his laptop and began typing. Farrington replaced his hat, turned and walked out the door.

A thirty two! A simple “F” would have been decent. An “F” got the message across. A thirty two meant that Ho wanted him to know to the precise digit how bad his test was. The two points for his name was cruelty. And on Halloween, too, the very night Farrington intended to purge himself of all his bad karma. In the morning he’d be a new man. He’d make a fresh start. What better way than as a pirate? To rape and pillage for a change? Try telling that to Ho. The way he had looked at Farrington’s costume, the way he had lectured him, the two points of credit for his name! There were two types of people in this world, as far as Farrington was concerned. There were those that make life easier– Farrington felt he fell into this category – and those create problems. Like Ho.

And Amanda.

She had kicked him out of the apartment, his beautiful second-story two-bedroom Victorian with a view and enclosed garden, his dream apartment, the one he had found through his friend. Otherwise it would have meant going on an application list to compete with a hundred other couples. Now it was hers. And she kept his grandmother's persian rug, too.

Shaken by the talk with Ho, Farrington decided to study at the library the hour before Ho's seminar. He'd make use of his time. Luck found his favorite spot unoccupied. It was a round, nearly enclosed carousel on the third floor that had a comfortable seat and good lighting. He set down his anatomy book, cracked it open to a random page, and fell asleep. The next thing Farrington knew, he was lying in the arc of a cheerful lamp watching dust motes frolic in front of his face. He thought they resembled slow-motion kittens wrestling in zero gravity.

Farrington's relaxed state was refreshing and extraordinary, and it was no wonder that his conscious mind resisted the frantic impulse circling outside the perimeter of his thoughts to fix the day, time, and place. But then his eyes focused on an illustration in the book spread out before him, depicting the cross-section of a woman's reproductive organs. With a mixture of arousal and panic, he realized he was late for Ho's class.

Moments later he stood outside the seminar room, collecting his nerve. He adjusted his scabbard and captain's hat, and opened the door, hoping to be unobtrusive. As he stepped through the door, however, Dr. Ho, who was standing on a dais aiming his laser pointer at an image of what appeared to be a stuffed summer sausage projected on the wall, immediately stopped speaking. A look of

satisfaction spread across his face, and he nodded. Farrington nodded back. He removed his hat and saw bits of feather float in the air. Ho resumed his lecture.

“As you can see from the shinbone, the third stage of diabetes has set in...”

Farrington noticed that many students in the room were staring at him, suppressing grins. He thought he heard a low voice say “avast, ye scurvy dog.” Face burning, Farrington stole over next to Melinda. He raised his eyebrows at her. She ignored him. Farrington found the tape player in his bag, set it on the table, and pressed “record.” He had to nudge Melinda twice to break her focus. She had been writing furiously, and her notebook was filled with meticulous lines of purple ink.

“Can you flip the tape for me when it stops?” he whispered.

Melinda scowled. She rolled her eyes. She shrugged. The gesture was noncommittal, but it was enough for Farrington, who crept out of his seat and toward the door.

Ho stopped his lecture. “Where are you going, Farrington?” he boomed, deep furrows forming on his brow.

“I’ve left a tape recorder,” said Farrington, feeling his tongue move of its own accord. He added, as if in afterthought, “matey.”

An astounded silence filled the room. Smiles turned into grins, and soft chuckling into open laughter. Farrington stood amazed at his impertinence.

Doctor Ho’s cheeks puffed out until he resembled an angry balloon. “That’s it, Farrington,” he said, “no more mister nice guy.” Ho’s lame retort sent

another wave of glee through the class. Farrington used the confusion to duck out the door.

“Prepare to be boarded!” he shouted as he entered the martini bar on Haight street an hour later. He had three hundred and fifty dollars in his pocket, fifty more than the pawn broker had offered him for his laptop. Farrington was forced to haggle for the extra money. He felt a mean satisfaction knowing that the sight of his sword and pistol had influenced the sale. The extra fifty was needed, too; the ATM on the way home from school showed a negative balance in his account.

A knight and a clown greeted him, and Farrington bought them both martinis, not the house gin, either. He meant to stay for one quick drink, but the conversation was so lively he ended up having three. He told them the story of interrupting Ho’s lecture in full pirate regalia, which made the knight double over with laughter. He had friends in the acupuncture program, heard plenty of horror stories about Ho, and complimented Farrington’s nerve.

They walked down Haight together, stopping in bars. In the Irish pub, they ran into a large group of acquaintances, and the knight told them Farrington had walked out of a lecture singing sea chanteys. There was much laughter and applause, and Farrington didn’t have to pay for drinks, but he did have to belt out “Drunken Sailor” for the amusement of the crowd. “*What should we do with the drunken sailor?*” he sang, “*Make him sleep with the captain’s daughter!*” The whole bar clapped the time and sang the chorus. Someone brought over a chair for him to stand on. “*Yo ho and up she rises,*” he sang above his motley crew of

lepers, princesses, vampires, hookers, firemen, mummies, transvestites, cowboys, and movie stars. A beer was pressed into his hand, and he raised it. "May the wind fill yer' sails," he toasted, "and yer never look back."

The clown introduced Farrington to a zombie with shoulder-length hair and white teeth. He was shorter than Farrington, who had to stoop to shake hands.

"He stars in porno movies made in Santa Cruz," said the clown.

"Hippie porn," said the zombie, "Amateur stuff. Not the real thing."

"Still," said the clown.

"What's it like?" asked Farrington.

"Dude," said the zombie, "you've no idea."

There was the salsa place up the street next to the falafel joint, then a crowded taxi along Geary for the karaoke dive bars, and then another taxi up over Seventeenth and down the other side to the Mission and a series bars on Valencia. Eventually they found their way to a party in a renovated Mission district walk-up.

Farrington romped into the kitchen brandishing his pistol. "All right, yer scalliwags," he said, "where ye be keeping yer rum?" There was laughter, and they cleared space around the keg for him. He swallowed a cup of beer and wiped his chin with flair.

There was a striking woman dressed as Dorothy in the corner of the living room. She wore a blue gingham knee-high dress, white socks, and black patent-leather shoes. Her hair was in pigtails, and her smooth calves crossed and re-crossed as she shifted her weight. Farrington caught her glancing his way while

she talked. Once she brushed against his arm as she headed towards the bathroom. “Excuse me,” she said smiling, and left the scent of coconut in the air.

Farrington stood nearby where he could keep an eye on her and talked with a merman who complimented his costume. “She said I lack ambition,” said Farrington, “can you believe that?”

“That’s so uncalled for,” said the merman.

“She’s got my persian carpet. Three generations in my family. Huge, it’d fill this room. She kept it because it fits the apartment. She kicked me out.”

“She didn’t.”

“She can afford the place, she says. She’s a corporate stooge, that’s why. She’s got money. She used to bring home all these idiotic visualization techniques and inspirational speeches. Pure marketing bullshit. I hate marketers. They’re pricks. They don’t do a damn thing. They should all be shot.” Farrington made sure to speak loudly so that Dororthy could catch the important points.

“You don’t say,” said the merman and drifted away.

Farrington knew he looked dapper in his boots, but it took him time to work up the nerve to cross the room to where she was standing. When he did, she turned her back to put on her coat. He stood behind her while her friends looked on. Embarrassed, he hurried off to the kitchen and waited, but she never came.

Rifling his pockets, he found he had only fourteen seventy-six left and cursed paying the zombie’s taxi fare, who now stood surrounded by three laughing nurses. Farrington wanted to shout, “watch out, he’s been in porno!” but discovering that the keg was empty distracted him. After paying for booze all

night, he realized he wasn't drunk. He grew angry and kicked the keg. Hopping on one foot and cradling his toe, he swore loud enough to turn heads.

The knight called to him. They had been talking about speed chess, and the zombie boasted about playing the boardwalk hustlers in Santa Cruz. Farrington dismissed the small-town players, and a chess set and clock were brought out and set up on a table in the living room to determine bragging rights for northern California.

The presence of the crowd convinced Farrington to let the challenger play white. The zombie started a queenside attack that took Farrington by surprise. Before a minute passed he was down a bishop and three pawns. His face turned red with effort and redder still as he slammed the clock at each misplay. The zombie had three of his five minutes left when he mated Farrington's king.

"No one plays queenside," said Farrington, "it's sneaky."

"Sneaky," said the zombie. "Or good?"

"Two out of three," said Farrington, "I'll play white."

This time Farrington started a standard king's side opening. The zombie matched his every move, and through to the mid-game, they were even. The room was quiet enough to hear feet shuffling on the floor. Then the zombie forked Farrington's queen and rook, and there were shouts and applause.

A fat priest stood to the side of the table. "Nice move!" he gushed.

"What do you know about it?" Farrington turned away from the table, letting go of the timer.

"Chill, man," said the zombie, "you don't have to yell."

People made faces. Some looked angry. Marketers, no doubt. Why should he care? He had it, frankly, and drew his sword. “Avast ye land lubbers,” he said, “d’ye wanting to be swimmin’ with the fishes?”

The damn zombie panicked. His yelping and squeaking set the crowd against Farrington, who felt hands on his arms. When he struggled, he kicked the table over and sent the chessboard and pieces flying.

“Arr, they be a molestin’ a swabbie,” rang a sea-weary voice. A tall pirate with a red beard that hung to his belt pushed his way to Farrington. The hands claspin’ Farrington released as if by command. “Look to yer arms, men,” he said to the two pirates that followed. One was short with a wooden leg, the other thin with a pox-scarred face and a hook for a right hand.

Red Beard held out his hand, which Farrington clasped. “It seems you be needin’ a ship,” he said. “Yer welcome to our company, if ye be wantin’ it.”

“Aye,” said Hook and Peg Leg.

Farrington sheathed his sword. Red Beard pressed a half-pint of rye into his hands. Farrington unscrewed the cap and swigged. The liquid burnt his throat and made him shudder.

“Clear the decks for action!” shouted Red Beard, as the merman – presumably the host – approached the pirate band with a scowl.

“Look here— ” he started, but Hook pushed him and he fell backwards, tripping over his tail.

There was a melee. Farrington found himself grappling with a werewolf whose fangs dripped with blood. Red Beard was holding back the crowd with a

vicious-looking saber. Hook stood on an armchair spraying the room from a bottle. Peg Leg trundled by with a double armload of panties and vintage whiskey.

“I’ve found the treasure,” he growled, and, as if this were a pre-arranged signal, he, Red Beard, and Hook headed towards the door.

“Come on, matey!” shouted Red Beard, “there’s no time to lose!”

Farrington slipped from the wolf’s grasp and followed the pirates to an alley where a black Cadillac SUV was parked. Glare from the street lamps reflected in its metallic skin. It was beautiful and expensive. Farrington had never rode in anything like this before; he himself had owned a series of used Japanese cars, the kind that handle and conserve gas. As he climbed into the back seat – leather, of course – he felt giddy. This was the perfect vehicle for pirates.

The bottle of whiskey went around the truck and ended up with Hook at shotgun who sucked at its mouth like a lover. Red Beard started the car, and speed metal blasted from the speakers. Farrington felt the bass line penetrate his bones. Peg Leg buried himself under a mound of panties, inhaling deeply and making strange grunting noises.

Farrington tried small talk. “So what do you guys do?” he asked, or yelled, above the music.

From under the panties, Peg Leg yelled back. “We’re investment bankers.”

Hook turned from the front seat. “Dude,” he said, “we’re pirates!”

“Argh,” said Peg Leg.

Hook snorted and spit whiskey on the dash, and Red Beard threw back his head and laughed. He drove to Dolores. He gunned the truck up a steep hill and down the other side. Farrington's stomach lurched. Street lamps flew past. The Cadillac swerved through traffic, and Red Beard hit each light at the green. When they reached sixteenth, he took a right and cruised towards Mission. Hook slipped his elbow out the window.

The upscale clientele of oxygen bars poured out onto the street next to cut-rate noodle shops, Mexican cafeterias, and check-cashing stores. The streets were filled with addicts and gang-bangers and dot-com kids out for a lark. It was noisy and bright and dirty. Farrington saw tough characters study the SUV as it passed. They were careful to hide all trace of emotion, save for a steady look of smoldering hate. Farrington returned the glare and brandished his pistol. Despite their masked faces, he knew they were impressed.

He saw the reflection in the window of an empty bank. He saw a black SUV full of pirates. His face was among them, long and pale with a dashing cut of hair on the lip and chin. It was a handsome face, and its expression was severe and confident. A long, curved blade was in one hand, a pistol in the other. He was a bad ass, and it felt good.

Red Beard circled through the Mission district. As they drove, Peg Leg grew ashen-faced. He stuck his nose out the open window.

"I think I'm going to hurl," he said.

Farrington took Peg Leg's hand and pinched the flesh between his thumb and forefinger. "This is the pressure point for nausea," he explained. Only as Peg

Leg was vomiting out the window the SUV did Farrington remember that the area, if pressed, might cause nausea, not cure it.

Hook turned in his seat. “Do you know of any happening parties?” he asked. Farrington didn’t. He wondered at the use of the word “happening.” Just then he saw Ho’s car parked on a side-street. Or what looked like Ho’s car.

“Stop!” he shouted, and he leapt from the truck. It was an early nineties Mercedes all right, but he couldn’t be sure it was Ho’s. He peered in the windows, but the seats were spotless. There were no clues as to the identity of the owner.

Hook and Peg Leg came over, breathless. “What’s up?” said Hook.

“I’m going to trash this car,” said Farrington.

He walked over to a nearby empty lot and found the metal stub of a street sign with a clump of concrete still attached to its base. When he returned with it, Hook and Peg Leg were gawking. Red Beard ran up, too.

“Don’t just stand there, boys,” said Farrington and smashed the windshield of the car with the street sign, wielding it like a mace. An alarm set the car honking. “Go to, me pretties.” Red Beard, Hook, and Peg Leg looked at each other, then whooped. The attack was quick, but efficient.

As Farrington watched, Hook punctured the tires with his curved talon, Red Beard smashed a side window and jimmied open a door, and Peg Leg tore the car’s upholstery and then vomited on it. Farrington pictured Ho’s expression when he found his car – if it was his car – imagined the pompous sneer extinguished and replaced by a look of horror. Who was causing problems now? To finish the work, Farrington squatted over the driver’s seat with his pants

around his ankles and defecated. He stood back and admired the curling turd. It was appropriate. It expressed his contempt in one small, elegant package. He chuckled. It felt good to stand over destruction.

“Let’s go, me hearties,” he said, and they ran off to the SUV, which was parked down the block.

The bottle of rye circled the truck again, accompanied by laughter. “I can’t believe you puked...Did you see what I did to the stereo?...We really fucked that car up.” They each looked to Farrington, and he glowed.

“You’re crazy, man,” said Peg Leg, “really whack.”

“Aye,” said Farrington, “I’m free as the wind.”

“Where to now, captain?” said Red Beard, peering in the mirror.

Farrington ordered sails to be set for the Halloween festivities on Castro.

“We’ll be sure to spy a fat merchant vessel there,” he said. “If luck be with us, me boys, we’ll be swimming in booty before the night is done.”

“Arrrr,” said Hook.

“Arrr,” said Peg Leg.

“Aye, aye, captain,” said Red Beard.

Excitement in the truck was high as they drove through quiet, dark streets. Row houses rose on either side of the narrow lanes, which were just wide enough for the SUV. It was late. Most of the houses were dark. Farrington could see lace curtains and tidy gardens, and he could see the windows shake and bend from the truck stereo’s beat.

“Ahoy, swabbies,” said Hook, “a sail off the starboard bow.”

The truck slowed and, over the slumped Peg Leg, Farrington saw two women – girls, really – walking arm-in-arm on the sidewalk in the headlights. One wore a cat costume, the other a maid's.

“Worthy prizes,” said Farrington. “Pull alongside and prepare to board.”

Red Beard turned the music down, and Hook poked his body out of the window. Peg Leg revived, rolled his panties into a ball, and hid it behind his back.

“Easy goes it,” said Farrington. “Don’t startle the doves.”

The women lurched as the car swept to the curb. They were drunk. When they saw the SUV of pirates, they burst into laughter. Cat suit grabbed the maid, who toppled into a bush and squealed.

“Hi,” said Hook out of the window, “headed to a party?”

Cat suit giggled and ran a hand under her nose. “No,” she said, “we’re going home.”

“The night is young,” he Peg Leg, “it’s too early to go home.”

The maid shook her head. “It’s late, we’re going home.”

But cat suit leaned against the SUV and said, “you got any drugs?”

Farrington noticed that she looked young, too young to be out drinking maybe, and that her hips were heavy. The painted mascara around her eyes were smeared into dark rings. Her hair was damp and her skin gray in the street light.

“How many of you are in there, anyway?” said cat suit. She leaned in the window and looked Farrington directly in the eyes.

“Plenty to go around,” said Farrington. “Why don’t you two hop in? One in the back, one in the front.”

Cat suit pawed at the car door. The maid in the bush shook her head. “No, it’s late” she said, “come on, Courtney.” She tugged on her friend’s arm.

“Now,” cried Farrington. He spat out a thick, guttural cry of rage. He tried to draw his sword, but only hit his head on the roof of the car.

Hook lunged for cat suit’s wrist, but she jumped back. When Peg Leg fell out onto the street at the maid’s feet, she shrieked for help. Farrington pulled Peg Leg back into the SUV. Red Beard accelerated hard and gunned the truck down the street. Tires squealed.

“Hot damn!” shouted Peg Leg. “We almost had them!”

“I could smell ‘em,” growled Red Beard.

“I could taste them,” said Hook, looking back over his shoulder.

There was an awkward bulge at Peg Leg’s midsection. He retrieved the panties from behind his back and placed them over his crotch. “Damn,” he said and sighed. “Damn.”

They were silent. Farrington saw tension in shoulders. He knew a few well-placed needles would open the channels for their energy to dissipate comfortably. But he didn’t have needles. Plus he was enjoying this. He felt powerful.

“Man,” said Hook to nobody in particular, but Farrington felt every word slice his innards, “let’s get some booty. I’m dying up here.”

Farrington gave the address on Stanyan.

Red Beard turned off the headlights and the stereo when they turned onto the steeply rising street lined with old Victorians. Farrington directed the car to

the driveway of his house. His former house. It was a three-story painted lady built in the eighteen-seventies, survivor of two major earthquakes. She was peach and violet, like a flower unfolded. His house, his.

They got out, careful to swing the doors softly. Farrington stood and smelled the ocean. He looked out across the park and the university mission to the bridge and the headlands beyond the bay. The lights of the city looked like gold and jewels.

Red Beard nudged him. He looked jittery. So did Hook and Peg Leg, who leaned against the car playing with their hands. Farrington was going to crawl into a window and open a door from the inside. Amanda would let him in, even at this time of night and dressed as a pirate. She might be irritated, but that didn't matter.

Farrington slipped through a narrow space at the side of the house and over the back gate into the garden. He looked over his unfinished projects, the scar in the ground he'd cleared for the vegetable garden – only he had never gotten around to planting the vegetables – the pile of rocks he'd collected to build a walk now overgrown with weeds, the camp chair he bought for contemplation last summer, now rotted with disuse. Why hadn't Amanda cleaned it up? She used to complain about the garden all the time. It was as if she had left it this way to needle him. Here are your failures, she was saying, your unfinished projects. But that was a different Farrington. This one was a pirate captain.

He strolled over to the fire escape at the side of the house.

The ladder at the bottom of the fire escape was six or seven feet off of the ground, but Farrington climbed the tool shed where he could reach across to the

lowest rung. He had to be careful, though. The ladder was noisy. He didn't want to wake Amanda until she could see it was him. Otherwise she might call for help. So he moved up the ladder rung by rung, not daring to breathe.

A few moments later he reached the bedroom window. The light in the back yard created a glare; Farrington had to press his face to the glass to see inside. The apartment was dark but his eyes soon adjusted.

Amanda was asleep on the bed a few feet away. She was curled facing away from the window. The bedcover moved with her breath. The bedroom looked spacious without his belongings. She had replaced the antiques he preferred – which looked homey, in his opinion – with a Scandanavian-designed dresser and a severe black metal lamp by the bed. The room had been transformed. It was not a place Farrington would feel at home. It was all darkness, angles, and textures and utterly alien.

“Prepare to be boarded, lassie,” he muttered.

Through the bedroom, Farrington spied a slice of the living-room. There he saw a fragment of his carpet, his grandmother's persian carpet. It was once bright red and decorated with elaborate patterns, but now worn by the feet of his family to a respectable, subtler color. So what if it was too large for his little studio? So what if the apartment was too expensive? These were his things. Now he would take them back forcibly, as prizes of war.

Just then a sigh rippled in the bed inches away. Amanda turned to the window and curled on her side. A fist drew the comforter to her chin. Her face

was an impossibly white oval in the dark, impossibly tiny. Her mouth was a wet bow the color of exotic fruit.

The sight of her – the first he'd had in weeks – dislodged a memory. He couldn't say why, but he recalled the night he came home from school and found her curled up on the couch with a J. Crew catalog, weeping. The tears on her face made her skin translucent, and he went over and wiped her cheek. "What's wrong?" he asked, cradling her head in his arm.

"It's so happy," she said.

She held out the page to him, and he saw a preppie couple sitting on a porch swing with a basset hound between them. They smiled like professionals. He didn't understand. The scene was fake. He told her so. She got angry.

"I knew you wouldn't understand," she said, slamming the door. He touched his thumb with his tongue and tasted salt.

Later in secret he studied the photograph. He traced the couples' smiles with his index finger and saw only whitened teeth. He touched the distinguished patch of gray at the man's temple and knew it was dye. Their embrace was stiff, their heads, leaning against one another, were patently arranged. What did Amanda mean, "happy"? He couldn't see it. It was a sham. Yet somehow he knew the image was a clue. If he could understand, he'd figure it all out. Her, him, everything. He looked at it for hours, but found nothing.

Now at the window he knew. With its watermelon-colored slice of tongue, its dark eyes guileless, its smile utterly joyful, she of course had meant the dog.

It was with regret and sadness, then, that he curled the fingers in his palm, pulled back his arm, and swung his fist in a gentle parabola three times against the glass.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

He would let her keep the rug.

PARADISE

No matter how he tried to put a good face on it, Harold Nye had to admit he was disappointed. It was all too ordinary.

He still had to do the mundane, day-to-day chores he thought he'd left behind for good. He had to launder his clothes, wash his dishes, call the plumber, trim his fingernails, and bag his own groceries. His two-bedroom apartment was pleasant enough with its cavernous closet space and view of the mountains, but the water ran hot and the wallpaper in the kitchen – featuring golden monkeys swinging on powder-blue palm trees – had to go. And the toilet tended to back up. And the living room carpet smelled of dogs. In fact, the apartment had a dingy, lived-in look as if the previous tenants kept a menagerie of pets and children.

On top of that, there was nothing to do. There was no career to pursue. There were no movies or television, no books, magazines, or Internet hookups. There were people – the streets teemed with robust, contented strollers – but while they murmured polite phrases at each other, to Harold they were stand-offish. The few acquaintances he had made were dull conversationalists, averse to debate and prone to long silences. Still, everybody else seemed content. They walked a lot,

taking long, rambling hikes in the mountains – appreciating God’s works, no doubt. Or they could be seen meditating on the banks of the river, twisting their limbs into knots. But Harold found no respite in these activities from his inadequate, stuttering brain. He was trapped with his memories, which were laced with regret.

If pressed, Harold would say he liked Heaven all right, but really it was like going on vacation to your own home. He was disappointed, he couldn’t get away from it. What had he expected anyway? Clouds? Blond angels strumming on harps? As a child he had once drawn a picture of a Heaven with mountains of vanilla ice cream and soda pop geysers. If he had given it much thought as an adult, he would have supposed Heaven was a paradise, not a quaint mountain town, and that every moment of the afterlife would be ultimate and ecstatic. Certainly he would have expected the answers to the great questions of life to be laid out before him like a road map. Instead, the afterlife raised more questions than it answered. He felt cheated.

On top of it all, God had disappointed him, too. She was a woman. She was plump. She had freckles. She also had a slight speech impediment, like Her tongue was a little too big for Her mouth, and when She got excited She had trouble pushing words past Her teeth. These imperfections startled him when they first met, which only added to the awkward scene at the pearly gates. As surprised as Harold was to see God resembling a kindergarten teacher, God was surprised to see Harold at all. She shook Her head and said something about an administrative error and checked Her paperwork not twice, but three times before letting him

pass, muttering an apology after him. Television writers were not common in Heaven, She said. Harold entered Heaven not sure what to think. He had felt superior to God and supposed he did belong elsewhere for feeling that way.

Alone night after night, feeling foreign and lost, he would have liked company. A woman. Amanda, to be specific. Beautiful, raven-haired Amanda, the love of his life. To hold her sinuous and compact body in his arms, to house her velvet-and-nails whisper in his ear, to drink the seawater of her loins, that would be an appropriate reward for achieving ultimate perfection, to say the least.

* * *

To occupy his time, Harold started writing again. Although television didn't exist in Heaven, he worked on sitcoms. He invented several series set in the afterlife. *Come Back Up, Moses. Paradise Misplaced. Who Took My Harp?* Each featured a slightly eccentric family and their madcap adventures in Heaven. There was the episode in which little Billy Collins releases frogs into the heavenly choir practice room. Or the show where King David falls for Melinda Hogg and challenges her boyfriend Stan to a ping pong match, winner take all. And his favorite, the episode that made him wish there were Emmy awards in Heaven, was the season's finale of *Let There be the Beasleys!* in which the Beasleys encounter the Serpent on their vacation trip to Eden.

But each series degenerated like clockwork in season three, when a beautiful raven-haired stranger appeared among the cast, breaking up the families in explosive adulterous trysts. Harold knew Amanda was working her way into his writing and causing his comedies to degenerate into soap operas, but he

couldn't help himself. He felt himself drawn towards her confidence and needed to bring her three-piece suits and lawyerly manners into his shows. She was real and alive, unlike the hammy and harmless families she destroyed, and when season three started, it was with relief and longing that Harold wrote her into the scripts. She drank in front of the children. She smoked in the living room and flicked ash on the shag carpet. She worked for the D.A.'s office, and it was with glee that she helped cast the wayward blessed into the fiery pits of Hell. "He deserves to burn for all eternity," she said as the Beasleys rued the damnation of Eddie Futz, the owner of Sacred Grounds, the local coffee shop where the Beasleys could always be found.

* * *

Shortly after Amanda got Junior Beasley hooked on crack, Harold found a nice hand-written note from God slipped under his door. "Sorry about the mix up," she wrote, "let's start over and get off on the right foot. Coffee? Tea?" Under the elegant, gold-ink handwriting was an address stamped on the bottom of the paper for "Ruth's Café" and under that, a day and time scrawled in pencil as if in afterthought.

Harold found Her at a small table in the front window. She was eating a jam pastry in front of a chessboard set up on the table in front of Her. She smiled as he sat down. "Hope you don't mind if I play white."

Harold didn't mind. He looked around the café. It was half-filled with quiet customers sipping from porcelain cups, lost in meditative trances, or

chatting in low voices. He smelled milk and honey on the breeze wafting in from the screen door. And coffee from the kitchen.

“Nice atmosphere,” he said.

God plunked Her elbows onto the table and rested Her head on Her hands. She studied him. She had a way of looking that made Harold feel naked.

“You’re kind of cute,” said God. She looked smug, the way unsure women do when they decide to be bold.

Harold was taken aback. “You think?” he said.

“I do,” She said. A half smile tipped onto Her face.

Harold felt uneasy. Not at the compliment or the its suddenness, or even with the clumsy flirting, but with its source. The ultimate being. His creator. Was this a form of incest?

She turned Her attention away from Harold to a pawn on the chessboard, tapping its head with Her index finger.

“I think you’ll like the coffee here,” She said and laughed abruptly. It was a horsy laugh, but genuine and guileless. For a painful moment, Harold felt the taste of envy. So what if She laughed like a car mechanic? He wished for Her simple humor, Her peace of mind.

Harold went to the counter and got himself a coffee and a raspberry cream-cheese croissant on God’s recommendation and rejoined Her at the table. She appeared lost in thought, examining the pieces on the chessboard. When he sat down, She looked startled, as She had forgotten where She was.

“I love this part of the game,” She said, indicating with a sweep of her hand the pieces laid out in neat rows. “It’s perfection. Infinite possibility lies before us. It’s almost a shame to play.”

“Is that some kind of allegory?” asked Harold.

“About the other day, at the Pearly Gates,” said God, pulling away from the table.

“Forget it,” said Harold.

“No,” said God, “I want to apologize about the mix up. It couldn’t have left you with a good impression.”

“I said forget it. You weren’t the only one surprised to find me here.” He made a noise in his throat and looked away for a moment.

“It’s all right, Harold,” She said, leaning towards him and laying a hand on his forearm. “Eat.”

He bit into his pastry. A cascade of creamy sweetness rolled across his tongue. A slug of coffee followed. Harold closed his eyes and savored its earthy bitterness, which contrasted perfectly with the pastry. The comfort and solidity of the café with its sturdy tables and chairs, its broad hardwood floorboards, and the sunlight arrayed into geometric patterns across its space seeped into Harold’s flesh, which tingled. He sighed.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” said Harold. “What’s it all about? Life. Death. The universe. You, me. Why? You must know.”

“I thought you’d like it here,” said God. She pushed the white king’s pawn two squares. “Your move.”

* * *

Their relationship lasted seven months. Seven months! With an eternity to contemplate, Harold revisited each and every day of their brief affair and could count only six days of peace. All of the other days had been marred by rage, jealousy, insults, or sleepless nights. Even their lovemaking was frantic and violent. When Amanda finally told him to move out, she called him weak and ugly and admitted to having three affairs. He threw a fork at her. She ripped up his copy of the first episode of *Star Trek* signed by Gene Roddenberry. The neighbors called the police, and the cruiser dropped him off at a friend's house. A week later, he found his belongings in cardboard boxes on the sidewalk in front of his friend's house.

Why this hold over him? But it was there, it lived in his brain like a fungus. When he closed his eyes, Amanda leaned over him and bent her lips to his ears. "Ragin' stallion." Sure, it was corny, but what a whisper she had, rough and smooth and hot, and he could feel sex in his gut. When Harold slept, he dreamed of Amanda biting him. She clamped down with bared teeth, leaving welts on his skin. He could feel her hair across his belly as her head dipped lower. Just as she reached his groin she chortled, and Harold gripped the sheets so hard he woke himself up. Everything reminded him of Amanda. Vacuuming. Rain. Even the ear wax on his morning Q-tip. He couldn't escape.

Harold gave up the sitcom scripts. What was the point? He wanted to write about Amanda, not the Beasleys, so he cranked out horror screenplays. *The Attack of the Five Foot Seven Woman*. *Runaway Hearse*. *Dead, But Dangerous*. In the

movies Amanda was shot, bludgeoned, thrown from cliffs, hog tied and drowned, frozen in ice, but she emerged from her death each time unscathed and angry. His imagination failed him. He couldn't exorcise her from his thoughts.

He wanted her back. He had always wanted her back. It took six years after their breakup before he could sleep with another woman, and even then he had to close his eyes and pretend she was Amanda. Why? Amanda hated him. He hated Amanda. His layman's knowledge of psychology suggested that he agreed with Amanda's opinion of himself, and that by successfully reuniting with her – if she were to fall in love with him – he would be whole, complete, lovable and acceptable. The relationship would be a symbolic acceptance of himself. He would find peace. It was just a theory and wrong somehow, but it was good. At least it explained why he wanted Amanda. But it didn't bring him any closer to her.

* * *

"Mate in two," said God, moving Her rook to the end of an empty file and pinning Harold's queen.

Harold pushed over his king, abdicating the game.

"You're distracted," said God.

"I've got a lot on my mind." He threw a hand over his face. He rubbed his eyes. They were raw. Pushing them made them burn. He hadn't slept in three days. Instead, he had worked non-stop on his first novel, which was already crawling past two hundred pages of stream-of-consciousness drivel and which he was tentatively planning on calling "Amanda." He had spent a good hour the

night before writing the title, crossing it out, and rewriting it, wondering if libel laws applied in Heaven.

“So what’s on your mind?” She sipped from her coffee.

“You name it,” said Harold.

“Shoot,” said God. “I’m listening.”

“You want to know? Really?” When God nodded and leaned back in Her chair, Harold held his breath. She was so smug. He laughed, a bitter bark. He remembered Her laugh, its innocence, its simplicity, and the envy he had felt. He watched Her face soften with concern, and he grew angry with Her pity. He was Her creation, wasn’t he? Couldn’t She just wave Her hand and make him feel better?

“First off, I don’t get this. You. Heaven. Everything.” Harold sipped at his cup, but he had already finished his coffee. Frustrated, he banged the cup on the table. Several chess pieces toppled. “Can’t you tell? I’m not happy. Aren’t I supposed to be happy? Isn’t this paradise?”

“What’s bugging you?” She said.

“Existence The afterlife. I don’t get it. What does it mean? Why am I here?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Tell me.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Start with something simple, maybe. What’s on the other side of those mountains?” he said and pointed out the window to the ridge of grassy peaks rising over the town.

“Why don’t you see for yourself?” She answered.

“Who are you? What are you? Are you omnipotent? Infinite? All powerful?”

“What do you think?”

“Why do you answer all my questions with questions?”

“Why not?” She grinned. She tapped the table top with Her fingers in a way that irritated Harold.

“Could you...you know...” he said, pointing to Her hand.

God’s hand froze. Then with deliberation, She raised Her index finger and brought it down hard. It made a surprisingly loud sound. A crooked grin spread on Her lips. She repeated the gesture, but now with Her middle finger. *Tap*. And then the ring finger. *Tap*.

“Cut it out,” said Harold.

“What’s bugging you?”

Harold stood. “Nothing,” he said and stood, “I should get going.”

“Where? Back to your apartment? To sit on your ass all day and write crappy screenplays?”

Harold noticed with discomfort that people in the café were staring. He sat back down. “For your information, I’m writing a novel,” he said. “Could you keep your voice down? You’re making a scene. If you’d act like a proper god – ”

The café grew silent. Harold felt a number of eyes on him.

“No need to get snippy,” She said. She sniffed.

“I’m sorry,” said Harold.

“You don’t mean it,” She said.

“I do,” said Harold. “I am. Really. Put yourself in my shoes. Wouldn’t you be a little confused? Angry? Feel helpless? I lashed out at you. I was wrong.”

God’s frown deepened. “I can tell you this. I am God. I don’t know the answers. Instead, I know all the questions.”

“What?”

“It’s true. The questions are eternal and infinite. The answers are unique and specific to each one of us. They’re mortal, they change. You wanted to know what’s on the other side of those mountains. What if I told you? In a second, the wind could change and countless blades of grass bend in a new direction, and everything I told you would be untrue.”

“That’s ridiculous. You could give me a general description. You don’t have to describe every blade of grass.”

“Do you know the heart of things? Does a general description explain what you need to know? Do you know what you need to know?”

Harold lay his head on the table. God’s questions made his mind race. Outside, it began to rain. Large drops struck the glass next to their table, making a loud, hollow sound that reminded Harold of August afternoons when he was a child. He wished he could take it all back, all of it, he wished he had never been

born, that he could crawl back into his mother's belly and shrink to the size of a walnut.

"What's bugging you?" asked God.

"It's Amanda," he said.

God sighed and leaned back, crossing Her arms on Her chest. She shook Her head, and tried to blow aside a loose lock of hair that hung over Her eye. "Go on," She said.

"Where is she?"

"I'll give you three guesses," said God, glancing down.

* * *

Hell was a lot like Vegas. It was an enormous desert city perpetually blanketed by night. Wide boulevards lined with hotels and casinos and flashing lights sliced through the city, and its sidewalks thronged with countless pedestrians. On every street corner there was a spectacle, reenactments of famous disasters – the Hindenberg, Titanic, Vesuvius, the Black Death. Entertainers sang, juggled, or performed magic. Giant television screens hung from the sides of hotels broadcasting stand-up comedy routines and advertisements for hair-care products. There was so much to see, so many things to do, and Harold felt a rush of excitement and a feeling of freedom.

Harold hated to admit it, but he felt elated as soon as he stepped under the neon and felt the crush of humanity. He was awed by the lights and the noise. Across the boulevard, an enormous fountain spit molten rock to the beat of a famous seventies pop song. Nearby, a sign flashed, *What You Do in Hell Stays in*

Hell! He wondered where he should go, when he glanced to his side and saw a rack full of guidebooks, all free. Among them was *Let's Go Hell*, an old Baedicker with fold-out maps, and *Go to Hell on Less Than Twenty Dollars a Day*. Harold took the *Let's Go*, a gas station map, and a pamphlet curiously entitled, *Hell's 101 Places Harold Nye Would Like to Visit*. Finally! he thought, answers! With a smile he searched through the rack some more until he found a small paperback on the bottom shelf: *What God Doesn't Want You to Know about Life, The Universe, and Everything*.

Guided by his pamphlet, Harold wandered for hours. He played poker, went swimming in a kidney-shaped pool, smoked cigarettes, tasted fine whiskey, and caught a showing of "Cats." His eyes were weary, his feet were killing him. Looking at the schedule in his pamphlet, he had another busy day tomorrow. There was the Gene Rodenberry lecture, the TV writers' banquet, and a double-feature of *Metropolis* (the lost footage!) and *Liquid Sky*. His head felt ready to explode. If he wanted to make this schedule, he needed some place to rest, some place quiet.

And then there was Amanda. He had looked for her, of course, but in all the excitement, he admitted he had forgotten her. In the morning, he thought, he'd look for her. In the morning. Or maybe before the double-feature tomorrow evening. In the meantime, he wanted a room.

As if in answer to his thoughts, Harold noticed a sign above the street lit in pink letters. "Vacancy," it read, and Harold followed the blinking arrow to the hotel's door.

A gaunt man with skin the color of french vanilla ice cream worked the front desk. He was smoking a cigar. When Harold walked in, he stamped it out in a fedora turned crown down on the counter in front of him.

“Whaddya want,” said the man.

“A room for the night,” said Harold.

“Name?” said the man and reached under the counter for a book with alligator-skin covers.

“I don’t have a reservation,” said Harold.

“Let me be the judge,” said the man, who licked his index finger and turned the pages of his book. “Name?”

“Harold Nye,” he said, “en – why – ee.”

“I know how to spell it,” said the man. He paused in his book and dragged the blackened stub of finger down the page. “Here we are,” he said. “Nye. Double-bed. Smoking. Stocked bar. Cable and Internet hookup.” He handed Harold a key.

* * *

The room was perfect. Harold wanted a cold beer, and he found a six-pack in the refrigerator. The rumbling of hunger had just moved his belly when a takeout menu slipped in under his door. Thai food, his favorite. He turned on the television, and “Casablanca” had just gotten underway. An hour or so later, he was lying on his bed in his boxer shorts slurping phad thai and crying a little when Bogey and Bergman sat in the office, reminiscing about Paris.

That's when Amanda barged into his thoughts like she always did during this scene. Harold remembered one of their six pleasant days. The day at the beach. It had been a hot August day, and they wondered at the empty parking lot, but discovered it was the beginning of fly season, and they ran back to the car slapping at black flies, deer flies, horse flies, and then went to an ice cream shop, split a sundae, picked at their welts, and held hands under the table.

If only Amanda were here, he thought.

There was a knock on the door.

"Who is it?" said Harold.

"Open up," said a familiar velvet-and-nails voice, "it's a raid."

She was barefoot, wearing a crumpled black slip-over evening dress and holding delicate shoes in her hand. When Harold opened the door, she brushed by him and sat in an easy chair in the corner of the room, tucking her legs underneath her.

"Nice outfit," she said, "It'll knock 'em dead in Hell."

Harold looked down at his boxers, saw the fold of tummy hanging over its waistband, and felt old, dirty, and tired. He went to the closet and found pajamas and a velvet smoking jacket, which he looped over his shoulders and tied at the waist. All the while, he was intensely aware of Amanda watching him.

"You look good," he said.

She sighed and leaned her head against the chair. "Eternity's been good to me."

"You like it here?"

“Blah blah blah,” she said. “Small talk, is it? Okay. Gee, the weather’s great.”

Harold felt the old familiar pain in his stomach. It was a knife to his bowels, and he slipped under the bedcovers, pushing aside his Thai food, not hungry anymore. He wished it would go better, but what did he expect? Her violet eyes seemed to glow, her limbs were folded like origami in the chair, and sadness rose in Harold’s chest.

“Look,” said Amanda, getting up off the chair, coming over to the bed and standing over him. “I’m sorry. Can I?” and she pointed at him vaguely. He nodded, and she crawled into bed, curling in his arm. “It’s good to see you,” she said.

“Why am I so lucky?” he said into her hair.

“Luck has nothing to do with it,” she said. “You’re in Hell. We all get what we want here.”

* * *

Amanda had changed. Harold didn’t notice at first, but later he realized they hardly fought at all, and when they did, it seemed like it was more for fun than out of earnestness. There were other things, too. Amanda never liked to vacation on Earth – she couldn’t sit still, she claimed, she needed something to *do* – but in Hell, she was eager to sit side-by-side on fold-out chairs on a nearby sun-drenched tropical isle. And when Harold said that smoking was a disgusting habit and made her smell like dead roaches, she gave it up, just like that. Even when Amanda found hidden in his sock drawer the sonnet Harold had written for God,

she simply praised his rhyming skills and made an oblique reference to a “heavenly threesome,” instead of breaking down into a hysterical jealous rage like he had expected.

But Amanda was delightful company and Harold hardly noticed the passing of time. They watched football games together and ate his favorite foods. She wore the type of sundresses he preferred, and frosted her hair – a style he had always like despite his own better judgement. Their sex was incredible to say the least, and she was always game for trying out new things, never laughing at his silliest or most perverted fantasies. She edited his work and helped find him a television station in Hell that loved his sitcom ideas, and to his delight they aired *Let There Be the Beasleys!* Thursday nights, prime time, the third season of which he rewrote, of course.

Still, something nagged him about her. She didn’t seem quite genuine, and one afternoon as they sipped screwdrivers and played gin out on a verandah under a sun umbrella, he asked why her outlook had become so positive. Did she undergo therapy? he asked.

Amanda only laughed at him. “Of course not,” she said, “I don’t do therapy.”

“What is it, then?” asked Harold. “What’s different? Am I easier to live with?”

“You? Easier to live with? You’re such an egoist. If anything,” she said, “you’re more self-absorbed than ever.”

“Gin,” said Harold, and he laid his cards on the table.

Amanda sighed and took a drink from her glass. "You win again," she said.

"What is it, then?" he said.

"This is Hell," she said, "we get what we want. I'm here because you want me."

"Then is this what you want, too?" he asked.

She nearly choked on her drink, she was laughing so hard. "Not a chance," she said. "I'm the Amanda you want. The docile version. There's an Amanda for every desire." She scooped up the cards lying on the table and then threw them high into the air. The cards fell like confetti around them, some cutting diagonals to the ground, others hanging for an instant, flashing in the sun like jewelry. Harold caught glimpses of numbers, suits, face cards. "Just like that," she said.

"And the real Amanda?" asked Harold.

"You don't want to know."

"Try me."

"Let's just say she's not fucking you," said Amanda and smiled.

* * *

Since this conversation, Harold could not rest. He tried to provoke Amanda with arguments. He criticized the way she dressed, he made fun of the books she read, he admitted that he had never liked the crowd she ran with back on Earth. He was testing her, of course, but she failed to rise to the bait. Each time, she demurred to him. She changed her clothes, asked him for reading

recommendations, and made fun of her former friends, saying that his friends were better, and that she never knew Trekkies could be so interesting.

He began to wish that she would fight back. So then she did. But just when her comments cut a little too close to the quick, when his feelings were bruised, she backed down, apologized, and baked him lasagna to make up for the bad feelings.

He couldn't sleep at night. He spent more and more time alone, wandering the streets of Hell looking for a good poker game, which he always found, of course. Amanda didn't complain. She was always waiting for him when he got back.

Finally one night, she was waiting up for him, sitting in a cone of light in the living room.

"You want to talk?" she said.

Harold stood before her, shaking with emotion. He hadn't slept well for days, and exhaustion caused tears to pool in his eyes.

"I want the real Amanda back," he said.

The change occurred immediately. The rosy coloring from the tropical isle faded from her cheeks, the frost in her hair melted away, and a curtain of coldness descended between them. He smelled smoke.

"You're so pathetic," she said, got up from her chair and walked to the door, pulling a cigarette from her pocket book.

"Wait," he said.

She stopped.

“I want it to work,” he said. “With Amanda. Not docile Amanda.”

“Sure, whatever,” she said. “You’re pathetic.” She trooped back to her chair. “Oops, did I use that line already?”

“Not like that.” Harold felt exasperated. He felt like he was wrestling smoke. “I want it to be real. Two people. An unknown future. Working together. Compromise and sharing, trust. All of it. I want it to work, Amanda. I want us to get back together. Not any of this you-get-what-you-want crap.”

“Whatever you want, Harold,” she said in the docile voice that infuriated him.

* * *

God was an hour late. Harold sat on the bench in front of Ruth’s, basking in the sun. He wore his sunglasses and watched Her walk down the street towards him. She was wearing bright pink pumps that clashed with the dress She wore, and She bent forward a little at the waist. Bad posture, thought Harold, noting the rounded shoulders.

When She mounted to the two steps to him, Harold stood. She came right up to him and wrapped Her arms around his neck and pressed Her body to his. Harold was caught off guard, and put his arms awkwardly around her back. He felt Her trembling limbs through the thin fabric of Her dress and felt conflicted about the desire that rose in his thoughts. This was God, after all.

She held Her face towards his. “I’m glad to have you back,” She said. Harold noticed for the first time the dimples that formed on Her cheeks.

“Did you know?” he asked. “Was that really Hell? Or was it some elaborate setup you planned for me?”

“Now why would I do that?” said God. She winked. “Aren’t we the little egoist? Thinking Hell was designed specifically for you?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean, Harold?”

Harold blushed. It was exactly what he meant, but he didn’t want to admit it. “I don’t know what to think anymore,” he said.

“Isn’t it delightful?” She said.

“Would you stop it?”

“Stop what?”

“With the questions.”

“Why?”

“They’re driving me crazy,” he said.

“Are they?” She said and tilted Her head upwards and parted Her lips, waiting to be kissed.

TIGER ORCHID

Nearly every night since her operation six years ago, Simone Fuller tried to have an out-of-body experience, but without success. What awaited her in the spirit world, Simone couldn't say. Accounts varied. Some told of meeting God or of picnicking on Venus under clouds of sulphur. The uninspired told of hanging above their bodies like day-old party balloons. Still other sources claimed that the nether world teemed with displaced souls full of trickery, searching for empty bodies to inhabit. Don't tell them where your body lies, wrote the authors on the Internet sites where you could buy a hypnotism CD for thirty-nine ninety nine that promised you astral projection within thirty days or your money back.

Alone in her bed, Simone visualized floating through the halls of her house, the floor plan of which she had memorized, from the two extra bedrooms to the study where her husband slept. But as she lay waiting for the vibrations to course through her limbs, for her soul to float upward, attached to her body by a glistening silver cord, for the chance to romp through the depths of outer space, nothing happened. Her spirit remained limp and unwilling.

That is, until she met Bobby Moss.

Simone first saw Bobby Moss in the health-food store in Missoula where she shopped. He was young, probably half her age, but had long, pale eyelashes and wide hands. *Bobby Moss*, read his nametag, *assistant manager, produce*.

It took six months to approach him. He was stocking the bins at the front of the store. Despite practicing incessantly for this moment, she found herself blurting to the tomato in his hand, “fruit or vegetable?”

Bobby wiped his hands on his apron – the same hands she had imagined in her hair and on her body – and leaned towards her. Simone smelled oranges. He put the tomato in her palm. Its skin felt taut and smooth, its flesh ripe.

“Ask it,” he said.

Simone stared at the tomato, then at the boy. His expression was so serious that she held it up and, in a mocking voice, repeated her question.

Together they stared at the tomato. It remained silent.

“Hold it up to your ear,” he said. “Maybe it’s shy.”

She did as she was told and pressed the fruit, still warm from his skin, to her ear. She listened, but heard nothing. She looked at Bobby Moss and shrugged.

“Exactly,” he said. “It doesn’t care. Why should you?”

Every Tuesday after that, she stopped by his cart and asked him questions. At first, she kept to the safe topic of produce. But as she grew bolder, she asked personal questions. She learned he was nineteen, that he had dropped out of college because it was full of “stuffed shirts,” like her husband, presumably, and that he had moved to Montana from the East Coast and would never, ever move back.

When she learned he worked part-time in a greenhouse and that he wanted a career in horticulture, she realized an opportunity. But it took two months of worrying in the pre-dawn hours of a bed her husband had abandoned, before she offered Bobby the job to resurrect her garden, which she had worked so tirelessly to destroy.

* * *

The problems between Simone and her husband, Jeremy, started with uterine cancer. Before the cancer, they were an ordinary couple. They had met ten years earlier, playing soccer. Jeremy had upended Simone with an illegal tackle, and in retaliation she had come down hard on his groin. He was finishing a doctorate program in ornithology, she was a high school English teacher. They married by a lake and settled down to hiking, tennis, and fly fishing. Jeremy acted in a local drama troupe. Simone gardened. Jeremy's family had money, and their marriage was unmarred by financial difficulty.

Until Simone was diagnosed with the cancer at thirty-two, they had never talked about children. Careers had been in the way – Jeremy found a tenure-track position in Montana and Simone enjoyed teaching – and the subject never came up. But once she had the cancer, that was all Jeremy could think about. He reassured her they would have a baby as soon as she got well, and urged her not to give up hope. While she lay in the hospital, he bought the house near the Blackfoot with land and two extra rooms. “An incentive,” he said.

But the radiation failed to destroy the tumors. She tried natural remedies. She tried chemo. Her doctor told her the uterus would have to come out, or she'd

die. It came out. Simone lived. Jeremy built the greenhouse and stocked it with mail-order orchids. It was compensation, he said. She could nurture plants. “Just imagine the flowers of a tiger orchid,” he said, “with wild stripes and sharp teeth. Wouldn’t that be something?”

But Jeremy withdrew from their life. He left in increments until he had all but vanished. When Simone saw him, it was only a glimpse of his shadow down the hall or of his back across the yard. They had stopped talking, and now yellow stick-it notes on the refrigerator comprised all of their essential communication. “Need ketchup,” said the notes, “hv nice dy.” Or, “pckge came 4 u, in bdrm,” or, “seen my glasses?” Of necessity, Simone acquired a psychic’s sensitivity and learned to interpret the placement of silverware in the sink, the noises through the walls, and the smell of his socks in the hamper.

He was writing a book, he said. It was a study of males of the white-striped bower, a bird that built elaborate nests decorated with shells, colored pebbles, and orchid petals. He holed away in his study, reading and writing during the day and at night sleeping on his leather couch amidst a pile of papers and journals. How ironic, thought Simone, and wondered if all along Jeremy had loved only her reproductive organs, which, until now, provided him with the chance to build a nest.

In retaliation, Simone destroyed the gardens. She over- and under-watered the plants. She exposed them to too much sunlight. She let weeds infest the soil. When the ferns, peas, sunflowers, tulips, and potatoes produced abnormal fruit or flowers, when mites and slugs crawled across their leaves, when fungus

consumed their stalks and roots, when the orchids dried out and shriveled away, she felt good. She hadn't wanted an ersatz uterus. She wanted her husband back. So she killed and enjoyed the power.

At night she tried to leave her body.

* * *

The Saturday following the offer of work, Bobby Moss showed up at the house as promised. Despite the chill April air, Simone had waited on her porch with an untouched cup of coffee and a cranky stomach. When finally she saw a cloud of dust on the road leading to the house, her stomach loosened and she gulped down the coffee. She went into the kitchen and waited until a well-traveled Japanese station wagon emerged like a copper chip from its cloud and rolled into her driveway before she again stepped out onto her porch. Two heads were visible through the car's windshield: Bobby's and a girl's.

When the girl emerged from the car, Simone noted with irritation that she had no hips or breasts – the prepubescent shape that was popular now. What was wrong with a *real* woman? she thought. Bobby introduced her, but Simone did not listen to the name. She made small talk, and the girl gushed about the property, its location, the view of the hills. Afterward, Simone led the pair to the flower and vegetable gardens in back of the house.

Bobby crouched in the dirt. Simone stood behind him. His neck was leathery with sun and moist with perspiration. His back and hips were narrow. *Lean* was the word she thought of. Charleton Heston stared out from his shirt. *Soilent Green*.

Bobby turned and scowled. He grabbed a fistful of dirt and held it up to her. “What’s this?” he asked.

Simone hesitated. “Soil?” she guessed.

“This?” He turned his hand over. Dirt trickled out of his palm. “This is sand.”

As Bobby wound his way among the weed-strewn furrows, he grew visibly angry. She had planted her corn two weeks early, he said. Her potatoes were frost-burned. She needed a windbreak – a hedge or a fence – she had already lost too much seed.

It grew worse in the greenhouse. Faced with pots of dried soil containing the withered remnants of mail-order orchids, Bobby laughed – more of a bark, really – and wanted to know whether she was growing orchids or fungus. The girl winced and slipped out of the greenhouse. Through the glass, Simone watched as she ballet-danced across her lawn, bowing and pirouetting with the grace of a bird. Bobby’s voice brought her back. How did Simone heat the greenhouse? he demanded. Or did she bother with trivialities like water and light?

Outside, the girl stopped dancing. She lifted her arm and waved. Beyond her, Simone saw a tiny figure at the edge of the property raise its arm, then vanish into the trees. Her husband.

* * *

Over the summer, the land transformed. Wildflowers appeared along the walk, as did a hedge in the backyard for a windbreak, a patch of corn, and poles for vines of string beans and peas. Greens, yellows, pinks sprouted; weeds

vanished. Hoses lay neatly coiled, the grass trimmed, new saplings stood in freshly turned earth.

In the greenhouse, *Encyclia cordigera* was the first to bloom. Its petals were deep violet; the flower's lip was bright pink. *Phalaenopsis schilleriana* came next: it carried hundreds of white petals, each with a rosy blush at its center. Even the leaves were beautiful: dark green mottled with silver, a dusty magenta underneath. *Cattleya labiata* bloomed at midsummer. It stood over two feet tall, featured dark rose-colored petals adorned with yellow lines leading to patches in the flower's throat. It smelled like honey.

Only the *Rossioglossum grande* failed to bloom. The tiger orchid. Bobby set several of its bulbs in a corner of the greenhouse, and created a special environment for it. He turned down the gas heater in the greenhouse ("tiger orchids grow in alpine regions," he explained), a cardboard shade hung over the plants ("they prefer less sunlight than the others"), and their leaves were clipped ("you over-watered them, I had to cut the dead tips"). Bobby reassured Simone that it was only a matter of time before they bloomed.

Simone's enthusiasm for the gardens grew. She woke in the mornings and strolled through her yard, touching petals, examining leaves, working her way to the greenhouse where she sat on a stool, drank her coffee, and read the paper surrounded by fragrance and color. She watered and weeded, and she checked on the tiger orchid several times a day to see if it had flowers.

When Bobby came – three days a week – she watched him work. She studied his hands, the way they sifted, folded, caressed, pinched the plants, the

soil, stems and leaves, stamens, and pea-pods. She followed him around the property, waiting for a moment – to talk? To kiss him? That was exactly it. To kiss him like a schoolgirl. But the chance never arose. Bobby acted oblivious, sometimes ignoring her completely. And he always brought the girl, who stood behind him as he misted ferns or mixed bark with sand.

Still, Simone was able to be close to Bobby through the things he touched. She found a sweatshirt he left behind and pressed it to her face. Or held the trowel he used to weed, and imagined his fingers entwined with hers on its grip. Or studied the tiger orchid, and wondered how he would adjust the lamps over Simone if instead of the orchid it were her body stretched out on the table. Or smoothed the wrinkled blankets in the guest house bed where she had found a condom wrapper, and pictured herself – and not the girl, as it must have been – with Bobby.

One day on her usual prowl after Bobby, Simone found the girl alone in the greenhouse. She was testing the tiger orchid's potting material with a finger.

She wore a backless shirt held onto her body with a single drawstring. Her skin was pale, and there was a large mole on her left shoulder blade. Here among the leaves and fronds, the girl's skinny body looked appropriate. Like a woodsprite's. Simone realized two things at once: she had never seen her away from Bobby, and she didn't know her name. She wanted to hold the girl, pet her hair. Instead, Simone said, "don't injure the plants."

The girl withdrew her hands from the pot and wiped them on the apron tied around her waist. She lifted a spray bottle and misted the orchids.

“Is it true?” said the girl. “I heard. You had an operation.”

The question threw Simone off-guard. She told her she had and wondered where she had heard.

The girl looked uncomfortable. Her eyes were unable to meet Simone’s.

“Is it true,” she said, “that you can’t – you can’t...you know, with a *man*?”

Simone felt for her. She envied her ignorance. Did the girl appreciate what she had? “I can,” said Simone. “Only – it’s different.”

“Oh?” said the girl.

“No orgasm.”

The girl put down her spray bottle and turned away from Simone. She played with something on the bench in front of her. A garden fork. “That’s so sad,” she said in a low voice Simone almost missed.

Sad? thought Simone. *Sad*? Did she even understand? She imagined how this girl – this *girl* – saw her. Bitter, secretive, strange. Rude. A spinster. People like Simone *deserved* their fate. Cancer. Rot. Personality like a parasite eating away at the body. That’s what they thought, these *girls*. But life happens, she wanted to say, it isn’t *earned*.

The girl picked up the spray bottle again and started down the row of plants, away from Simone. The spray trigger made an awkward grunting sound. “I notice things,” said the girl. “Bobby loves the orchids. He loves your garden. He really likes you, too. He thinks you’re...*cool*.” The girl kept edging away. She pinched a leaf between thumb and forefinger. “I’ve noticed you like Bobby, too.”

What could Simone say? This was far from an accusation. Should she say something?

“If you want...” said the girl. She blushed.

“Want?” said Simone.

“You can watch,” said the girl. “In the guest cabin. We’ve been – we’ve – if you want, you can watch. I’ll leave a window open. Because you need...*something*.”

She was almost in tears. Simone felt sorry for her. The offer was absurd, outrageous, but she wanted to comfort the girl. “Honey,” said Simone, “What’s your name?”

* * *

Then one July evening, Bobby came to her. Simone hadn’t seen his car pull into the driveway and didn’t know he was even there. But as she sat sipping wine on the porch of the guest cabin in the shadow of the silver maples and wondered if she should make braised lamb or roast duck for dinner, Bobby emerged from the greenhouse and walked the path through the garden to her.

He trailed his fingers through the tips of wild bunchgrass, stooping now and then to examine something invisible. With his head down, his eyes nearly shut, and a perfect look of concentration on his face, he looked like he was praying. As he neared, he lifted a hand in greeting. Simone waved back. His shirt – a flannel unbuttoned to the waist – parted and revealed a heart-shaped tangle of hair in the center of a flat chest. He clomped up the three steps of the porch and sat at Simone’s feet. Simone smelled loam and man-sweat, honey and salt.

He asked what she was doing. Simone lied. She hadn't tried to leave her body in weeks, since the time Bobby started working on her garden, but she said she was trying to have an out-of-body experience. It was an odd lie, because she had always felt silly about the attempts and had never told anyone else, but she told him suddenly and without thinking. Maybe she wanted to impress him or shock him.

Instead, Bobby's expression remained unchanged. "Any luck?" he asked.

To Simone's astonishment, when she shook her head, he stood and held out his hand. It was strong and cool, with long, delicate fingers and callouses on the palm. Bobby gripped her as tenderly as if he were holding an egg. Simone held her breath.

He drew her into the astral plane.

Simone would remember only fragments. A silence so deep, it pulled at her hair, eyes, skin. Moonlight spilled across the guesthouse deck, broken into innumerable shapes by the shadows of the silver maples. Her body in its chair, smudges under its eyes, its long hair streaked with gray, its skin hung with sadness.

And then she stood on a finger of land jutting out into a violet-colored lake. On all sides rock rose like shoulders thrust free of the earth. A gibbous moon hung in the sky like a naked belly. A breeze caressed the water, which sighed and lapped at the shore at her feet. Simone glowed from within like a Japanese lantern. Her limbs were as light as air, as quick as thought. She laughed and heard bells.

A whisper in her ear. Bobby's voice. "See." He stood before her, naked. He pointed, she turned and saw that the bank was covered with tiger orchids, thousands of tiger orchids, with petals striped like throats of red and white – the jaws of an animal. Out of the corner of her eye, the flowers clawed the ground and bared fangs. But when she looked right at them, they became flowers again, swaying, nodding.

Bobby took her hands, drew her to the water where a dozen boys frolicked, splashed each other with water, pushed each others' heads under the surface. She saw bare legs, buttocks, necks, and chests, saw foam churned where they played. Bobby plunged into the water. Simone hesitated on the bank, then followed.

* * *

Every evening after that, Simone waited for Bobby on the guesthouse porch, but he never came. During the days, the sight of him working tortured Simone. She wanted to ask him, was it real? Did it happen? But the girl always stood by him. Simone was already avoiding the girl, she certainly didn't want to bring up astral projection when she was around. She couldn't possibly know. It would complicate things.

But Bobby obsessed her now. She anticipated the wait on her porch from the moment she awoke. She could picture the way his hair plastered to his head when wet. She could still feel the ghostly press of his palm in her hand, still carried his scent in her nose. She saw the scar on his abdomen, the birthmark on the small of his back, the slope of his shoulders, chest, ribcage. She felt how the

weight of his body had left its mark on her belly like a tattoo. And with each memory, hope rekindled. Perhaps tonight, she thought.

But days passed, then weeks, and the memories faded. The wait on the porch became a chore. It made her bitter and withdrawn, and now when Bobby and his girlfriend arrived to work around the house, she hid inside. She started missing nights out on the porch. And finally one night, she gave up altogether. She was so dejected she couldn't eat and went straight to bed. But when Simone mounted the top step of the stairs, she saw that her bedroom door was ajar, and a light shone inside. She crept down the hall and put her eye to the crack in the door.

The room stood in shadow, broken by the rose-colored light thrown from her bedside lamp, which fell mostly on her bed, creating the illusion that it levitated in the dark. Her husband lay sprawled on the bed, barefoot, his shirt untucked and unbuttoned, his glasses on the bedside table. He held Simone's pillow to his face as if he were reading it.

Simone was surprised by how much he had changed. His once full – almost plump – cheeks had withered into gaunt hollows. He had let his hair grow, and long, wild curls stood from his scalp, as if outraged. Deep lines appeared at the corners of his eyes and mouth. He looked old and tired and sad. Still, in the reclining figure Simone recognized the man she had once loved – and loved still, she had to admit, despite the paunch lolling above his belt, the puckered nipples, chest hair turning gray, the tired eyes. How had this all happened? When had it gone wrong? She couldn't remember the exact moment, but she recognized the

wreck of her life. The run of things, her marriage, her dreams. In the slow ruin of the man on her bed, she recognized her own self.

Then, suddenly, he put the pillow to his nose and drew in a long breath, closing his eyes. He rolled to his side, curled his knees into his stomach, and cradled the pillow against his head. His body shook. At first she thought he was laughing.

Simone grew angry. What was he doing in her room? she thought, why can't he just *talk* to me? And she realized she herself had never traveled the length of the downstairs hallway to knock on his study door, to murmur through the closed door, can I come in? Not once. And she couldn't blame him anymore. Things had gotten out of control. She had gotten out of control.

Simone swung open the door. It crashed against the wall. He looked up, but without surprise, then shrugged, put the pillow down, and replaced his glasses. When he sat on the edge of the bed and bent over to lace his shoes, Simone saw a bald patch at the top of his head through the tangle of curls.

"When did that happen?" she said.

He finished tying his shoes and sat up on the bed. "What?" he said.

She stepped to the side of the door. "Never mind," she said and pointed down the hall. He left.

* * *

It had been simple arrangement. Simone approached the girl, said quietly to her, "when?" The girl shrugged. Today. This afternoon.

From the kitchen, Simone saw Bobby the girl walk hand-in-hand across the back yard towards the guesthouse. Just as he did the night he came to her and drew her into the astral plane, Bobby trailed his fingers through the grass. The girl bowed her head and slipped an arm around Bobby's waist. Simone waited for five full minutes after they had disappeared into the guesthouse before she stepped outside and went after them.

She chose the window under the silver maples, figuring that the trees' shade offered her the best protection from being seen. She bent at the waist and scurried to the wall. She held her breath. Her pulse throbbed at the throat. She spread her hands on the siding and imagined a vibration coursing across her palms. Slowly she raised her head to the window – it was speckled with dirt, and a cobweb inhabited a corner pane – and put her eye to the gap in the curtains.

At first it was dark. Then, out of the gloom's interior, a tangle on the bed appeared. Simone saw a pair of feet. They lay side-by-side, lifeless, inert, slack, like discarded candy wrappers or a forgotten newspaper. As Simone's eyes adjusted, they reddened at the soles, and she saw a planter's corn on a toe, and a ragged toenail. Other limbs fell into focus, jogging thighs, kneading fingers, an arched back.

How skinny they looked! she thought, and worried that they might knock knees or strike ribs against one another. She noticed other things, details she had never noticed before. Gasping breath, like fish on land. Skewed expressions. Not pained, but close. Humiliation mixed with worry, perhaps. And a certain

monotony to the whole act, like watching a machine, a metronome or clothes drier.

She had expected sex. She had expected Bobby. But she realized she hadn't even thought of him. It was true she was drawn to what was going on, but in an ordinary and simple way, thinking, this is the way it is. Dull and necessary.

Just when she was about to steal away, Bobby's eyes met hers. His mouth stiffened, and revulsion crossed his face.

Simone knocked at the door. She heard scurrying inside. She waited. After a few moments, the door opened and Bobby stood in his jeans. He retreated to the bed and sat next to the girl who had her hands under her shirt, adjusting. The girl did not look up. Simone took the chair just inside the door.

Bobby began apologizing, but the girl interrupted him. "I invited her," she said. Simone played with the fringe on the chair's seat between her legs. The bedcovers were askew. An animal smell filled the room.

"You were spying," said Bobby.

"I need to know," said Simone, "if it's true."

"If what's true?" said the girl, looking up.

"If Bobby came to me."

Bobby twisted his head a little. He put his hands together between his knees. He didn't look at the girl at first, only Simone. He shrugged. Then he turned to the girl. "I don't know what she's talking about," he said.

Simone could have looked closer at Bobby, studied his chest and stomach for the signs from before. If she found the scar, the birthmark, if she just reached

out and traced her fingers across his collarbone, she would know. But it didn't matter anymore.

The three people in the room looked at one another. The girl looked away first. She found her socks on the floor and slipped them on. Bobby laughed, a nervous chuckle. He found his shirt and pulled it on over his head.

"Bobby," said Simone.

"Please," said Bobby.

"When are the tiger orchids going to bloom, Bobby?"

He smiled. The girl smiled, too. "Soon," said the boy. "Any day now."

* * *

The temperature had dropped, and Simone shivered. She clutched herself, staggered away from the guest house and into the field, where she stopped. Overhead, the night sky was vast and impenetrable. The bright stars only intensified the blackness between them. She imagined herself projecting out into the depths of space and felt foolish. She would have gotten lost. Space would have swallowed her.

Simone went to the greenhouse. It was warm, filled with an odor of dirt and dampness, the smell of life. Inside, the lights glowed, a softness that made her feel buoyant. She walked between the rows of plants plunging her fingers into soil. She licked the dirt from her nails, grinding the grit between her molars.

She came to the tiger orchids. Of course they had bloomed.

In stead of wildly striped petals like the gaping mouths of tigers, it had sprouted ordinary brown-and-yellow flowers, a drab little plant hardly worth all

the effort it took to grow. Despite an urge to pull the plants from their beds, to rip the petals and leaves, she took up a spray bottle and watered them.

Inside, the house was still. Her footsteps rang in the empty halls and bedrooms. When she reached the study door, she heard his snore. It was a wheezy rasp that she hadn't heard in years, but which was as familiar to her as her own heartbeat. She pulled open the door. He was sleeping on the leather sofa with an arm over his eyes, a thick comforter draped over his legs, a rolled-up jacket as a pillow. Simone sat at his feet. He clutched his glasses in an open hand. A wildlife biology journal lay spilled on the floor where it had fallen.

She would ask him what he was thinking, or whether he was thinking at all. She would convince him to sell the house. To come up to bed with her. Maybe he would.

She touched his foot.